
Gender performance in qualitative studies of masculinities

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Abstract

The influence of gender in qualitative research studies of masculinities is considered in this article. The findings are based on two separate studies of masculinities involving men who participated in semi-structured individual interviews while enrolled at a private research university. Using West and Zimmerman's theory of gender performance, the authors argue that participants expressed themselves as men and offered responses to interview questions in ways that were aligned with traditional assumptions about gender roles and expectations. Data from the two studies are juxtaposed to illuminate the influence researchers' gender may have had on data collection and rapport building with male participants. Implications for future qualitative inquiries into gender and masculinities are offered.

Keywords

gender performance, masculinities, researcher identity

Study 1:

Male researcher: Alex, let's say you and a male friend are having a conversation about a girl. What might you say to him?

Alex: 'Man, I saw this girl today, she had a big ole' fucking booty!'

Study 2:

Female researcher: Do you talk about sex with the other guys in the program? Or is it more professional?

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Eric: Not . . . not like sex but like . . . I suppose women some yes . . . I guess well there is some sort of . . . I neither approve nor participate in this and it is sort of perpetuated by both men and oddly women . . . But, well, you know I can remember being in a baseball game with another guy and sort of talking about women around us.

The quotes above were taken from two separate qualitative studies that sought to understand the experiences of male university students related to schooling and masculinities. One study was conducted by a female researcher and involved graduate students; the other study focused exclusively on undergraduate men and was conducted by a male researcher.¹ In this article, we consider the ways in which a researcher's gender influences data collection and rapport building with male research subjects, particularly in studies of masculinities and male gender identity. Using data from the two studies, we examine the ways in which male participants perform gender within the context of the research and consider how their performances differ for male and female researchers. We analyse the data from the two studies based on theories of gender performance, paying close attention to participants' interactions with the researchers and the strategies the participants relied on to perform masculinities.

Over the past several decades, a lengthy list of scholars (e.g. Gill and Maclean, 2002; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Pini, 2005; Williams and Heikes, 1993) have written about the ways that cross-gender researcher interactions (typically female researcher with male participants) can challenge and alter the research process. Our work echoes that of Williams and Heikes (1993) who considered the ways that male nurses gave different responses to a female and male researcher. They noted, 'the degree to which gender differences frame or influence the research findings has remained largely unexamined' (p. 281). Although Williams and Heikes's study considered how gender shapes the research process, questions remain regarding gender performance, participant-researcher interactions, and how these constructs may influence the data obtained in qualitative studies of masculinities in college and university settings. The context of higher education warrants consideration given the numerous published reports concluding that universities are rich sites for the social construction of gender, in general, and masculinities, in particular (i.e. Harper and Harris, 2010; Jones and McEwen, 2000; Kimmel, 2008; Kimmel and Messner, 2007; Lester, 2008). Based on the findings from the two studies on which this article is based, we argue that two factors were significant in producing the participants' gendered behaviors. First, our gender led participants to make assumptions about how they were expected to portray themselves as men in the interviews. Thus, participants performed gender in ways that were aligned with these assumed expectations. Second, given that gender and masculinities were the primary focus of both studies, participants had a heightened awareness of how they performed gender in the interviews. As a result, the data obtained in the interviews were shaped, in part, by these two factors.

Previous inquiries on the construction of masculinities in research are situated primarily in studies of men working in traditionally female occupations like nursing and social work (Egeland and Brown, 1989; Evans, 2004; Stott, 2004; White and Johnson, 1998; Williams and Heikes, 1993) and, to a lesser degree, studies of men's health (Robertson, 2006; Williams, 1997; Williams and Robertson, 1999). We build on the work of Williams and Heikes (1993) and other scholars who have examined gender performance in qualitative

research and suggest that theories of gender performance provide an explanation for the differences in participant behavior. We also consider the methodological implications of gender on the research process. Certainly we do not advocate homogenous interviewer-interviewee pairings based on race, gender, sexuality, or any other identity dimension. However, as our data make clear, participants paint themselves in different ways to male and female researchers, particularly when talking about potentially sensitive issues such as gender. Discussing gender issues with men is fraught with additional complications, as men are typically socialized to avoid discussions about gender and masculinities that extend beyond heterosexual sex, toughness, and other topics that are socially constructed as masculine. Given that society typically has a set of roles that men and women are supposed to perform, we suggest that researchers of a particular gender might make participants more or less willing to share their thoughts on questions related to gender or gender relations.

We begin with a brief review of the literature on the impact of gender on research before turning to a discussion of theories of gender performance, which inform our findings. We then examine differences in the behaviors and responses between the men in both studies, and suggest that these differences might be due to the gender of the researchers. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings for future research.

Impact of gender on research

Many before us have written about the role that social identities play in the research process. For example, Troyna (1998) wrote about being a White man studying Black teenage boys. Similarly, Halberstam (1997) discussed conducting research within the LGBT community. Here, we discuss how gender might influence the way that participants respond to the researcher. Our review of the literature and data focus exclusively on the gender performance of participants; however, we acknowledge that researchers also make gender-based assumptions about participants which influence their gender performance in the context of research studies.

Women who study predominantly male settings are often challenged in gaining access and building rapport with participants. This issue has been well documented in the published literature, most notably by Gurney (1985), Horn (1997), and Pini (2005) whose male participants relegated them to subordinate roles in the research process. Some participants adopted paternalistic attitudes, explaining the most basic details of their work to the researcher. Others made sexual advances. Although initially each of these women was reduced to subordinate roles, most eventually were able to gain the trust of participants. The authors differed on the outcome of their subordination. While Gurney (1985) and Pini (2005) suggested that being placed in a subordinate role reduced their access, Horn (1997) contended that a marginalized role might result in greater access to the site and to participants. Whether these female researchers ultimately gained greater or less access to male participants, all agree that gender plays a prominent role in the research process, affecting the ability of researchers to establish rapport with participants.

While male participants are less likely to be sexually suggestive or paternalistic with male interviewers, several studies have found that male participants present themselves differently to researchers of different genders. Williams and Heikes (1993) compared

their experiences as a woman and a man who studied male nurses and found that they received different responses to questions on the same subject.

There were subtle, yet systematic, differences in the respondents' presentation of self. The nurses spoke to the male researcher in a much more direct fashion on the topic of gender roles, conveying a sense of biological inevitability or determinacy in their remarks about male-female differences . . . Those interviewed by a woman tended to suggest that male-female differences were not inevitable [but a result of socialization]. (Williams and Heikes, 1993: 284)

Such differences can best be explained by social desirability bias (Williams and Heikes, 1993), in which individuals shape their responses to tell the researcher what they think the researcher want to hear. These differences in responses raise the question of whether participants' responses are ever reflective of their feelings or always a calculated response to perceived social norms. While Finch (1984), Oakley (1981), and other feminist researchers favor gender symmetry between researcher and participants as a strategy to minimize the impact of power dynamics, others have challenged this perspective and argued that sameness in gender or social identities do not necessarily equalize power dynamics or produce non-hierarchical relationships between interviewers and interviewees. Other social identities, such as race/ethnicity (Riessman, 1987; Troyna, 1998), class (Edwards, 1993; Ramazanoglu, 1989), professional status (Ribbens, 1989; Tang, 2002), age (Cotterill, 1992; Phoenix, 1994), and sexual identity (Carrier, 1995; Halberstam, 1997) can influence power dynamics between researchers and participants in interviews because, as Troyna (1998) noted, 'researchers bring multiple identities to the research process and . . . these [identities] are constantly being negotiated in the course of interviews in ways which might strengthen the insider/outsider status of the researcher' (p. 101). For example, a Black male being interviewed by a White female will have greater gender privilege but less racial privilege, leading to confusion in the status hierarchy. In contrast, if the same student is interviewed by a White male, his racial identity becomes far more salient than his gender identity. In short, identities are constantly shifting, depending on context.

Some scholars (e.g. Cotterill, 1992; D'Cruz, 2000; Phoenix, 1994; Reed, 2000; Tang, 2002) have offered compelling evidence of fluid and contextual power dynamics in research interviews, which also challenge previous claims relating to power and hierarchy in research. Although a number of variables can influence the dynamics between researcher and participant, we suggest that gender becomes particularly salient in research studies focused on gender and masculinities. Our central argument is that perceptions of difference (male participants and female researcher; graduate student researcher and undergraduate participants) or sameness (male participants and male researcher; graduate student researcher and graduate student participants) not only shape power dynamics in interview contexts, but also rapport building and data obtained in the interview. We highlight gender differences and show how they influenced gender performance in the context of our interviews with men. To consider how gender plays out in qualitative studies of masculinities in university environments, we employed West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of gender performance. We discuss the key principles and assumptions of this framework in the section that follows.

Gender as performance

Theorists of gender performance suggest that gender is not biologically determined but created through social interaction. While scholars have taken a variety of approaches to studying gender as performance (i.e. Judith Butler's [1990] poststructuralist analysis), we find West and Zimmerman's (1987) approach to provide the most appropriate lens for understanding our participants' gendered behavior during interviews. West and Zimmerman argue that gender is a process, not a role that one inhabits. 'A person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 140). Their definition of gender draws on three points. First, they posit that gender is dependent on context; different masculinities and femininities are enacted in different situations. Second, gender is collectively created. Gender is not a characteristic inherent in an individual; rather, people collaborate to produce gender. Finally, both men and women adopt particular gender displays that others expect of them. Although gender is collectively created, men and women know the roles that their gender dictates that they inhabit. As we elaborate later, our participants engaged in gender performance during the interviews, sharing different types of information with the male and female researcher. We suggest that these differences influenced the type of data we obtained from the participants and had some impact on the research process.

Gender created by context and structures

Theories of gender performance suggest that gender does not lie in the individual. Institutional structures, including nations, corporations, and families, play a critical role in shaping the ways in which gender is enacted (Carrigan et al., 1985). As a result, gender cannot be understood outside of the context in which it is produced. Gender is produced on both an individual and an institutional level (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). In his study of male cheerleaders in two national cheer associations, Anderson (2007) found that men in one group practiced one type of masculinity while those in the other valued a different type of masculinity. Men in one group engaged in highly ritualized masculine behaviors, making every effort to distinguish themselves from women and gay men. In contrast, men in the other group evidenced no fear of homosexuality and collectively constructed a new definition of masculinity to include a wider range of men. Anderson traced these differences to the values of each organization. Simply put, institutional and organizational norms play a significant role in shaping the behaviors of members.

Gender as a collective creation

Created through interaction, gender is not a property of individuals, but rather of groups of people (Connell, 1987). Individuals engage together to produce a collective performance, regardless of whether they subscribe to the behavior they produce. However, most societies prize one configuration of masculinity over all others. Hegemonic masculinity represents the ideal to which all men are expected to aspire and further functions to

privilege men at the expense of women (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 2005). In the USA, dominant norms of hegemonic masculinity call for men to earn money, excel in the workplace, and provide for their families. Men who fail to meet these expectations are sanctioned, or accrue fewer benefits of male privilege than their peers who successfully do so.

Men who embody the characteristics valued by hegemonic masculinity (e.g. White, heterosexual, able-bodied) tend to gain most from patriarchy. In contrast, men who embody marginalized masculinities (e.g. gay men, men of color) might have their status as men challenged by their peers (Connell, 2005). That said, we acknowledge that many men choose not (or are unable) to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. They adopt different gender displays, perhaps eschewing compulsory heterosexuality, and seek to create their own norms of masculinity. While such displays may bring punishment, they simultaneously serve to challenge and, over an extended period of time, change definitions of hegemonic masculinity.

Gender accountability

Although peer groups might provide a sense of community, they also serve to regulate acceptable gender behaviors for their members (Stryker, 1968; West and Fenstermaker, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Societal norms dictate acceptable behaviors for men and women and often establish penalties for those who ignore such regulations. Individuals are rewarded when their gendered behavior is consistent with culturally defined norms. Likewise, when individuals violate gendered norms, they are punished. For men, being perceived as feminine, being assumed to be gay, or having one's masculinity publicly challenged by other men are perhaps the most undesirable punishments that one can face (Kimmel, 2001). Consequently, policing and regulating gender are powerful mechanisms for ensuring compliance with socially prescribed male gender roles within male peer groups.

We use theories of gender performance to guide our analysis in that our goal is to make sense of the ways in which participants performed gender differently for each researcher. As our data suggest, men in each study emphasized different masculinities. Men who participated in the study conducted by the male researcher emphasized sexual prowess and dominance over women. In contrast, the men interviewed by the female researcher presented themselves as thoughtful and rejecting of stereotypical gender roles. Theories of gender performance maintain that gender differs by context and that individuals adopt gender displays that others expect of them. This framework helps explain differences in our findings: participants did not have patently different experiences, but rather framed their responses, both consciously and unconsciously, to perform gender in ways they assumed were expected of them by the researchers.

Two studies of masculinities in university contexts

Data for this article come from two separate studies of masculinities at the same major research university in the USA. Before proceeding, it should be noted that neither of us participated in the other's study. Our collaboration and this article emerged from

discussions after data collection was completed. As we argue, despite researching similar populations on the same campus, participants presented themselves in different ways to us as male and female researchers. This article is an attempt to make sense of these differences. We provide a brief overview of the methods used in each study. For a more thorough description of the methods used in each study, see Sallee (2011) and Harris (2010). The remainder of this section will consider our collaborative analysis of the data as well as limitations of the study.

The purpose of the study conducted by the male researcher was to examine how socio-cultural factors (e.g. gender socialization prior to college, campus culture, peer group interactions) influenced masculinities and gender performance among male undergraduates. Data were collected over a four month period through individual semi-structured interviews with 12 men who represented diverse backgrounds and experiences. The participants included seven juniors, three seniors, one sophomore, and one first-year student. Five of the participants were White, four were African American, two were Latino, and one was Asian American. Two of the 12 participants were scholarship athletes at the institution. There were also two fraternity members among the participants. Each participant was interviewed one time. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

The study conducted by the female researcher focused on male graduate students in two disciplines, English and Engineering. The goal of her study was to understand socialization processes and how gender might differ by academic discipline. For six months she observed and interviewed 34 students to understand how masculinities differed by discipline and influenced students' experiences in graduate school. Like the male researcher, the female researcher was a doctoral student at the time of data collection. Participants in this study were interviewed twice for approximately 45 minutes per interview. All interviews were semi-structured and took place on the campus, either in the researcher's office or in a campus cafe.

Despite the differences between the two studies, we asked similar questions, including: 'What are the defining characteristics of a man in U.S. society?', 'What is it like to be a man on this campus/in this academic department?', and 'Describe the typical man in your academic department/on this campus.' The participants responded to these queries in the two studies in different ways, which we attribute, in part, to their motivation to construct their masculinities in different ways for a male and female researcher.

We were conscious of the perceived power imbalance between ourselves, as researchers, and our research participants. Thus, we employed appropriate strategies to reduce or limit the influence of power on our interactions with the participants and the quality of the data we obtained, including: dressing casually, offering to conduct the interview in a neutral location or a place of the participant's choosing, encouraging the participants to use common vernacular when speaking with us – much like they would with peers, and allowing the participants' voices to drive the conversation while periodically restating our understanding of what they shared to invite clarification and confirmation. Despite our best efforts to reduce power disparities during each encounter, we acknowledge that some disparity was inevitable. However, we believe that the gender differences in researcher identity played a critical role in shaping the information the participants shared with us.

In analysing the data for this article, we began by identifying common themes that were salient in both studies. We used open coding to establish initial concepts and

categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Following open coding, we collapsed categories based on shared properties and dimensions. We exchanged our analyses of the data and corresponding reflections on several occasions, which allowed us to affirm and challenge each other's interpretations of the data. We also made constant comparisons of the data across the two studies, seeking both convergence and disconfirming evidence of our interpretations. At the conclusion of this process, we arrived at a set of shared interpretations that were insight-rich and grounded in the data.

Several methodological limitations are worth noting. First, undergraduate men were the participants in the study conducted by the male researcher and graduate students were the participants in the study conducted by the female researcher. Therefore, some of the differences observed in the participants' gender performance may be due to differences in age-related gender identity development. However, many of the engineering graduate students were in their early 20s, just a few years older than the traditional-aged undergraduates interviewed by the male researcher. So, while we note that there are some differences that might be attributed to maturation, we simultaneously recognize that many participants across the studies were within a few years of each other. Second, each researcher was only involved in the data collection for one study; the male researcher only interviewed the undergraduate students and the female researcher only interviewed the graduate students. As a result, we cannot say with certainty how the undergraduate and graduate participants would have performed gender differently had they been interviewed by a female or male researcher, respectively. Third, in this article, we do not disaggregate the findings by race or ethnicity, but acknowledge that different racial and ethnic groups often adhere to different norms for masculine behavior. For example, some scholars have concluded that racial/ethnic minority men embrace hegemonic and stereotypical notions of masculinities in order to recapture a sense of lost manhood as a result of racial prejudice and discrimination (Connell, 2005; Levant, 1996; Majors and Billson, 1992). That said, our purpose in this article is to discuss patterns of gender performance that were consistent across the range of races and ethnicities that were represented among the men in this study.

Findings

Despite researching male student populations at the same university, we obtained decidedly different responses from the participants. Although participants reported similar experiences of being a student on campus, their responses on questions concerning sex and masculinities differed. Participants were more open with the male researcher and tended to be more opaque with the female researcher. We focus here on three ways the participants' responses differed across studies: 1) in ways they objectified women; 2) in language used to talk about sex; and 3) in definitions of masculinities in US society.

Women as objects

Participants in both studies reflected on and discussed their attitudes and behaviors regarding women. Analysing these discussions, it became clear that men in both studies viewed women as objects. However, the ways in which women were objectified by the men in the male researcher's study were remarkably different from the ways the female

researcher's participants objectified women. The men who were interviewed by the male researcher objectified women by focusing almost exclusively on their physical and sexual attributes. Participants reported that during their discussions and interactions with their male peers, they spent a significant amount of time 'assessing' and 'critiquing' women based on their sexual attraction. Whenever women became a topic of discussion during the interviews, nearly all of the participants immediately began to discuss the physical attributes that made a woman sexually attractive. For example, Ben was asked to describe 'some of the things that might be shared' when he and his male friends hung out socially. He offered the following response:

I mean, beside all the physical traits, like, 'She's got a nice booty,' or, 'She's fine,' or, 'I heard this or that' . . . You know, you just do the assessment and that's usually what it's about more or less when we're discussing girls. Normally we don't talk about, 'Oh, yeah, I heard she's a good student,' or, 'She's really nice,' or something like that.

Tyler, another student interviewed by the male researcher, was forthcoming in sharing the following example when he and some of his male peers objectified women while critiquing their profiles on Facebook:

Here's a good story. One time, literally, like four of us were all just going through people in Facebook and running them down, like head to toe, and say, 'Well, you know, I don't like her face. Her forehead is too big, her hair is nappy or whatever. She has some buck teeth. She's got some big tits, she's got a big ass, she's got a small ass, small tits.' . . . completely objectifying them. It's stuff that we would never do in the presence of [a] female.

As Tyler noted, the gendered behavior he described would not be observed had a woman been present. Likewise, Tyler had no reservations about sharing with the male researcher his involvement in these types of interactions that centered on objectifying women. Like Tyler, other participants in this study also prioritized women's physical attributes, namely their breasts, buttocks, legs, and body weight. One participant referred to women as 'hot' on several occasions within a very short time frame in his interview. When asked what made a girl 'hot,' he noted: 'Skinny . . . not skinny like anorexic, but not fat or anything, that kind of thing or that kind of thing. Girls with big boobs, that kind of stuff. Nice legs.'

On the campus at which the studies were conducted, undergraduate men who had reputations for attracting the attention of women or having sex with multiple women were considered 'cool,' 'popular,' and more masculine by other undergraduate men on the campus. Consequently, many of the male researcher's participants viewed women as objects to elevate their statuses and reputations as men among their peers. Rich, the president of his fraternity, declared that his house was considered one of the more popular houses on fraternity row and attributed its popularity to the parties he and his brothers regularly hosted. When asked what made the parties so popular, Rich exclaimed: 'the key thing is a lot of girls, [having] a lot of good-looking girls there.' Similarly, Blaine, a first-year student, shared some of the gender-related behaviors that led to status and popularity among undergraduate men: 'Bringing girls [around] . . . you got to hook up [sexually] with girls, you got to. You go get drunk and then you find some chicks, you

hook up with them. It's that kind of mentality.' On the whole, participants in the male researcher's study were more likely to describe women and their interactions with them in explicit and sexually objectifying terms.

Participants in the study conducted by the female researcher were sexist but not sexual in their objectification of women. These men were more subtle and not sexually explicit in their descriptions of women. When they discussed their physical or sexual attraction to women, the participants in the female researcher's study often referred to them as 'cute,' 'pretty,' 'good looking,' or 'attractive' as opposed to 'sexy' or 'hot.' For example, participants like Eric, an English student, admitted that he and his male peers objectified and recognized the sexuality of women. However, he downplayed the sexual objectification and used coded language with the female interviewer:

a certain degree of objectification of women is implicit in that, you know. And that doesn't just mean just looking at women as exclusively sex objects but also kind of envisioning a sort of radical difference between men and women that is only bridgeable, I guess we could say, through like intercourse or something like that, through sex. I think . . . or it that men and women sort of occupy separate spheres I guess you could say.

While the undergraduate men focused on graphic descriptions of their sexual exploits, Eric used academic jargon to distance himself from the act of sex. In addition, the female researcher's participants never made references to specific body parts or used words like 'boobs,' 'tits,' 'booty,' or 'ass' when describing women whereas the participants interviewed by the male researcher focused almost exclusively on body parts in their descriptions.

The female researcher's participants also objectified women based on their perceived intelligence (or lack thereof). This was a sharp contrast to the way in which women were objectified by the male researcher's participants who focused primarily on women's physical attributes. The engineering students in the female researcher's study believed that, in comparison to other disciplines, the women in their department were not very attractive. They attributed what they perceived as a lack of attractive women in engineering to the academic rigors of the discipline. These men assumed that few physically attractive women were smart enough to study and learn engineering. Logan, one of the engineering students, shared his perspective on this issue:

Logan: Engineering is not the place to go if you want to pick up on women. Every once in awhile, you'll see a cute girl walking down the [Engineering Quad]. She's lost.

Margaret: Does everybody descend on her to help her?

Logan: They go: 'Who's that? Oh, she's lost. That explains it. She's actually a Communications, English, Russian, or Education [major]. She's not an engineer.' There's a few [attractive women in engineering] and they're nice and you kind of get to know them as sisters [rather than in a romantic way]. But they are a minority, a vast minority.

Logan believed that most of the physically attractive women gravitated towards less rigorous disciplines. In fact, later in the interview, Logan suggested that there was a

'ratio of intelligence' to physical attractiveness – insinuating that the more intelligent the woman, the less physically attractive she will be. Across campus in the English department, Joe also shared that some of the male students in his department had reputations for being publicly rude or disrespectful toward women during class discussions and aggressively pursuing female classmates with the hope of 'getting into someone's pants.' These examples of the interactions between men and women in the department may be indications of how women are viewed as intellectually inferior and, as a consequence, objectified by some of the men in the department.

In sum, our analyses of the discussions about women revealed that both groups of participants objectified women, but did so in different ways. The male researcher's participants were much more sexual and direct in the ways they talked about and objectified women while the participants in the female researcher's study downplayed the objectification of women and used more cerebral language in doing so. These differences extended into their willingness to talk specifically about sex.

(Not) talking about sex

Participants in each study showed different levels of comfort with talking about sex with the researchers. Much in the same ways they spoke about women, men who were interviewed by the male researcher used coarse language to discuss sex while the graduate students spoke about sex to the female researcher in more restrained and often academic terms. Participants interviewed by the male researcher were forthcoming in stating their physical attraction to women and their interests in 'hooking up' with women. Some participants shared graphic details of their sexual interactions with women without much probing by the researcher and, at times, without being asked to do so. For example, Javier described a typical conversation:

It's always about the physical, like, 'Ah, man, that girl's hot. I want to fuck her,' or whatever, 'I want to do this and that,' like that's always what it's about. It's never, 'Ah, this girl is like . . . she seems really cool. I'd like to have a relationship with her,' and stuff like that, and I don't know, it seems like girls are more like toys or whatever.

Similarly, Dylan described typical conversations with his friends about women: 'Having sex on someone else's bed, your roommate's bed, or, 'I hooked up with some girl with huge tits.' I guess typical locker talk, guys being guys.'

Echoing Dylan and Javier, Blaine, a first-year student, described the conversations that typified his interactions with his male peers:

Blaine: [We] talk about girls [we] have crushes on and stuff like that or if you see your buddy and he's going to go talk to a girl and she's already [being pursued by another guy]. I mean, there's a whole like . . . almost an etiquette. Like you don't want to be a cock block, but then at the same time you can always flirt with other girls.

Frank: What's a cock block, just out of curiosity?

Blaine: A cock block would be basically like preventing any of your buddies from getting action and boneing [having sex with] a chick.

Frank: A cock block is bad among the guys?

Blaine: Right. It's just like you don't want to do it . . . I don't know, it's the kind of thing, what is it? 'Bros before hos.' You gotta keep your boys close. You know, girls shouldn't break up you and your friends.

Blaine might have shared these interactions with a female researcher but would likely not have done so using the same vernacular, specifically by referring to men who prevent male-female sexual hook-ups as 'cock blocks' and characterizing women as 'hos.' The participant may have assumed that because the researcher was male and presumably heterosexual, he also subscribed to stereotypically male values and conceptualizations of masculinities. Thus, Blaine's behavior suggests that discussing his male peer interactions in this way was not only necessary but desirable.

Participants in the female researcher's study also talked about sex, but in a different manner than Javier, Blaine, and the other participants in the male researcher's study. Graduate student participants were hesitant to discuss and share details about sex, and only did so with assertive probing by the female researcher. Once participants were encouraged to discuss sex, they relied primarily on intellectual discourse to do so. As the following excerpt illustrates, Cole admitted to talking about sex with his friend Buck while steering clear of the topic with his female friends in his writing group. However, despite talking about sex, he did not adopt the same language as the undergraduate men.

It actually comes up quite a bit with the women, but we don't talk about it in the same way. And I guess on the one hand, there's also – it seems like it can be dangerous subject matter . . . There are times when I think that men are more coarse, I would say or sometimes we can be really objectifying and male. And so that's easier, maybe . . . I think talking about sex just becomes dangerous because [pause] I suppose, in patriarchal society, what happens is that it could become objectifying and thus render people feeling oppressed or slighted or negative.

Cole not only refrained from using coarse language when he talked about women, but he also discussed how discussions of sex can serve to objectify women and re-enforce patriarchy. Moreover, Cole tried to explain differences between same-gender and mixed-gender discussions about sex to the female researcher. The male researcher's participants assumed that he understood the types of conversations that men have about women and did not attempt to explain the meanings of these conversations. However, such detachment might simply have been a mechanism for Cole to avoid sharing the details of his conversations with the female researcher.

Some of the men admitted to talking about women with their peers. While talking about dating fell into the realm of acceptable behavior, some of the men told the female researcher that they objected to the ways in which their peers described their sexual exploits. Christopher explained:

There are actually a couple of guys in the English department who I put in my asshole list who will make sort of – when it will just be us and there aren't women around, they'll make dirty

jokes or tell me about some date they went on and be very explicit. And I'm like, 'You know what? I barely know you. Even if I did, this is sort of – this is overly familiar, let's say.'

Christopher was quick to point to other men in the department as being inappropriate and crossing the line with their discussions of women. Like many of the men who were interviewed by the female researcher, he defined himself in opposition to dominant representations of masculinities – including sharing overt details about sex and relationships.

Yet, as the male researcher discovered, many of the men do talk about sex with each other. Even Cole, who provided thoughtful responses to the female researcher about the ways in which talking about sex might lead to oppression in a patriarchal society, was a willing participant in such conversations. While Cole presented himself to the female researcher as objecting to such conversations, his friend Buck shared the intimate detail of their conversations.

[Cole] seems to take vicarious interest in it at times. The girl I was just dating – broke up with . . . But she was 24, which isn't that big of a deal except I'm 33. I think, myself, even, I was more into that. That she was 24, which is so lame. But [Cole] would be like, 'Oh Buck! She's 24!' And I'd be like, 'This really wouldn't be that – you're making way too big of a deal of this.'

Buck did not discuss their conversations in fine detail. However, he did reveal that Cole was enamored with the fact that Buck's girlfriend was nine years younger than he. Given the ways in which society equates beauty with youth, particularly among women, such a position may be disappointing, but not remarkable. What is remarkable is the fact that Cole engaged in thoughtful analysis with the female researcher about the dangers of perpetuating patriarchy, yet with his close male friends could so easily get caught up in the very things he analysed. While the female researcher's participants may have acquired more sophisticated vocabulary to deconstruct gender relations in US society, many still continued to engage in stereotypical masculine behavior. Such trends held true regarding conceptualizations of masculinities.

On being a man

We both were interested in the ways participants constructed images of masculinities in the USA and the extent to which they applied such definitions to themselves. Participants in both studies identified similar characteristics: men are supposed to be the breadwinners; they should take care of women; they are natural leaders. However, the men in the male researcher's study more readily adopted these values as their own while the female researcher's participants tried to distance themselves from these stereotypical definitions of masculinity. In fact, many of the men in the female researcher's study suggested that definitions of masculinities were fluid and changing.

Although participants in both studies gave similar responses, some were more forthcoming with the male researcher. Just as they did not censor themselves in their discussions of sex, so did some offer up fairly traditional definitions of gender roles. For

example, Noah shared his belief that men are natural leaders while women were more suited for 'background' roles. '[Leadership] is really being in the forefront [which] goes back to how we view men personally. Women play the background and men are more in the forefront. So I think that goes along with traditional views of masculinity.' Noah implied that women should be less visible than men in leadership positions. While Noah focused on gender roles in the workplace, the majority of the male researcher's participants focused on gender roles in the home. Randy described his view on appropriate roles for men and women:

I've always believed in a very traditional view of it, not unfair view of male and female, but just traditional view. It's like the man drives . . . when you go on a date, the guy drives, the guy pays, you know. The guy protects [the home and the woman in the relationship].

For Randy, men are to serve as protectors of women in all aspects of their relationships, ranging from small matters like driving to larger issues such as protecting the woman from unidentified harm. This image of protecting and taking care of women was echoed in other responses. For Javier, protecting women extended to discussions of financial protection, or serving as the wage-earner for the family:

I think being a man, for me especially, is finding a woman that I can make her happy in all respects . . . for me personally, I feel like I want to protect her, I want to know that she knows that I can protect her and stuff like that. Like I can work and if anything ever happened, like she got pregnant or something like that, I can be the one paying for the bills and stuff like that, and I can also be the one making . . . cooking sometimes, making her happy and stuff like that, if that's what it takes.

Like many of his counterparts, Javier believed men should serve as wage-earners, to provide financial support for the woman in their lives, particularly if she becomes pregnant. In essence, masculinity is equated with being the head of the household. It is worth noting that Javier differed from many of his male peers in his discussion of helping significantly around the house. In this and other responses, he questioned the gendered division of labor in the home. Most of the male researcher's participants, however, simply discussed the roles that men should take outside the home: as breadwinner and protector.

The female researcher's participants also described stereotypical notions of masculinity that call for men to serve as the breadwinner and the head of household. However, the majority of men either suggested that such notions were changing or that they did not subscribe to those norms. One of the few exceptions was Logan who, while acknowledging that some men may now stay at home with their children, argued that men would always fulfill the role of head of household.

Even though all decisions can still be made equally, there still is kind of an idea of somebody's decision weighs heavier than the others . . . It's kind of who guides the family along and when the kids get in trouble and raising the kids and whose decision has weight and who is still the guiding force. Even if you're not going out to make the money, you can still be in charge of the direction the family takes.

Logan equated being a man and father with taking primary responsibility for the family and providing discipline for the children. While women may enter the workforce in greater numbers and men may take a more proactive role with their children, the traditional notions of patriarchal authority are best preserved.

The majority of the men interviewed by the female researcher, however, were quick to distance themselves from typical notions of patriarchy. For example, Michael described expectations of masculinity:

We're portrayed as someone that will lead because, traditionally men are the head of the household. Therefore, they are the leaders of their own household or family. So, I think there's still some sort of residual from that. But that's obviously changing for some people. I definitely don't expect to be the supreme ruler of my household, if ever I have a family.

Michael identified stereotypical notions of masculinity (leaders in the workplace and at home) that pervade US society. However, he also made sure the female researcher knew he did not subscribe to such norms while simultaneously suggesting that such norms were changing. Cole shared similar sentiments: 'The model [of masculinity] that I grew up with and has been shifting and changing ever since that time was much more of a rigid, firm, in control, powerful, dominating man. And I don't see domination as a desired masculine trait.' The majority of the graduate students could easily list traits associated with masculinity in US society, only after assuring the female researcher that they did not subscribe to such norms themselves. These participants also suggested that norms of masculinity were changing to allow a range of behaviors. However, as Logan pointed out, such changes did not mean that men would need to give up power.

As the data illustrate, participants in the two studies presented themselves in different ways to the researcher. The male researcher's participants were more likely to adopt stereotypically masculine behaviors – speaking about women and sex in objectifying ways and focusing on physical attributes. Participants in the female researcher's study were more likely to speak about women and sex in more cerebral terms, adopting an academic discourse to explain intercourse. Similarly, the men in the two studies used different language to speak about definitions of masculinity. While both groups of men identified similar characteristics (e.g. men as breadwinners and women's protectors), the participants in the female researcher's study were more likely to distance themselves from such definitions while the men in the male researcher's study more readily claimed the definitions as their own. As we now explain, such differences may be attributed to the varying ways that men choose to present themselves to researchers of different genders.

Discussion

In this section, we make sense of the participants' responses in relation to the three elements of gender performance proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987): (1) gender is created by social context, (2) gender is created collectively and (3) individuals are held accountable for their gendered behavior. Connell (2005), Anderson (2007) and other scholars argued that different cultural contexts produce different definitions of what constitutes normative gendered behavior for men. We contend that the two studies constituted

social contexts in which the participants performed masculinity in different ways. Although the purpose of both studies was to understand the participants' experiences related to masculinities at the same university, several contextual differences between the two studies – namely the gender of the researchers who conducted the studies and the developmental maturity of the participants – produced different responses.

Participants in the female researcher's study understood male privilege and recognized the ways socially prescribed gender roles reinforce male privilege at the expense of women. During discussions about socially constructed images of masculinities in the USA, these participants acknowledged that men are expected to assume positions of power and leadership in their workplaces and also suggested that these conceptualizations of masculinity were unfair and rightfully shifting in ways that were more equitable for women. Having been interviewed individually by a woman, the study provided a context in which the students felt comfortable or compelled to share their perspectives regarding male privilege. In addition, the participants likely interpreted the context as one in which they should not embrace gendered norms that position men as dominant and women as inferior since the interview was being conducted by a woman. In other words, both the focus of the interview (masculinities) and the gender of the interviewer (female) may have heightened the participants' awareness of the ways they performed gender within the context of the interviews and motivated them to present themselves as men who opposed patriarchy.

Participants in the male researcher's study also performed gender according to what they believed the researcher expected of them. But unlike their counterparts in the female researcher's study, these participants embraced culturally dominant notions of masculinity, particularly those that situated men as heterosexual and dominant in their relationships with women. These participants made little effort to distance themselves from the norms of hegemonic masculinity. They were comfortable discussing the physical attributes of women and did not temper or censor their language. Instead, they used the language that typified their informal interactions with their male peers when describing women. Also, with little to no prompting, the participants shared details about their sexual and material objectification of women. We contend that the study's focus on masculinities and the researcher's gender led the participants to assume that embracing these norms was acceptable within the context of the study. Our interpretations are aligned with William and Heikes (1993), Horn (1997), and Levinson (1998). These scholars concluded that participants shaped their responses in an attempt to align themselves with the researchers.

West and Zimmerman (1987) posited that gender is created collectively through social interaction. Further, they argued that individuals are held accountable for their gendered behavior. Accountability refers to the ways individuals are rewarded for performing gender according to group norms and societal expectations or punished for violating them. The collective creation of gender was evident in the interactions between researcher and participants. Recall in the study that was conducted by the female researcher, participants portrayed a more sensitive, progressive, and less stereotypical masculine identity that was informed by their perceptions of the researcher's gender performance and expectations. Similarly, the male researcher's participants relied on narrowly defined conceptualizations of masculinities that motivated them to present themselves as men

who embraced sexist and objectified notions of women. We contend that participants may have portrayed themselves differently had they been interviewed by researchers of different genders. In other words, participants in the female researcher's study may have been less guarded during discussions about sex and less concerned about presenting themselves as men who rejected traditional gender roles to a male researcher. The men who were interviewed by the male researcher may have been less forthcoming to a female interviewer in sharing sexist views of masculinities that positioned men as dominant over women. In fact, several of the men in the study confirmed that the way they spoke about women in exclusively-male groups was more objectionable than what would be observed when women were present.

In sum, the gender performance in the interviews was created collectively through interactions between the researchers and the research participants. This is not to say that the gendered behavior we observed among the participants was not authentic. Instead we argue that the participants' assumptions about difference and sameness with respect to perceptions of gender between themselves and the researchers led them to emphasize some aspects about themselves as men while downplaying others. Most of the participants presented themselves to the female researcher in ways that pointed to their enlightened status as men while participants who were interviewed by the male researcher were conscious about fulfilling expectations of traditional masculinities. Participants' efforts to protect their masculinities echoes the findings of Anderson (2007), Connell (1987, 2005), Kimmel (2001, 2008), Kimmel and Messner (2007), and Sanday (1990) and who all argued that men tend to adopt gendered behaviors that potentially reduce the likelihood of having their masculinities questioned or statuses challenged by male peers.

Finally, there were several contextual elements in both studies that influenced power dynamics between the researchers and the research participants and likely shaped the data that were obtained. For example, the male researcher was a doctoral student in Education during the time the study was conducted. Doctoral students have greater status in the academy than undergraduate students and are assumed to be more knowledgeable, especially in the context of research. Since all of the male researcher's participants were undergraduates, they may have granted him some intellectual deference. Yet, despite the power differential that existed between the male researcher and his participants that can be attributed to their respective statuses as doctoral and undergraduate students, the participants' power in the context of the interviews may have been elevated by the content of the study. The participants were more knowledgeable than the researcher about male gendered norms at the university. Therefore, they ultimately held greater power as sources of insight into the experiences of undergraduate men at the campus.

Although the female researcher shared doctoral student status with her participants, her identity as a woman likely heightened participants' sensitivity toward gender issues and created some anxiety or discomfort as they discussed their experiences as men with her. At the same time, the participants' identities as men afforded them insider status in a study of masculinities, thus granting them some privilege and power over her during the interviews. Power dynamics in the female researcher's study may have also been influenced by the participants' academic disciplines. Twenty of the 34 participants in her study were graduate students in English while the remaining 14 studied engineering at the graduate level. Engineering is a high profile discipline at most research institutions

and often commands a disproportionate share of institutional visibility and resources. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that the engineering students perceived some intellectual superiority over the researcher who was pursuing her doctorate in Education. In contrast, the English students may have perceived her as more of an intellectual peer given that English and Education are similarly situated in the academic hierarchy at research universities.

Our goal in this discussion was to unpack some of the power dynamics that may have been at play in the context of the interviews. Although academic class level and discipline both shaped the dynamics of interviews, we maintain that gender was a significant factor that influenced our interactions with the participants and the data we obtained about their experiences as men. However, it is also important to acknowledge that gender is not the only dimension that influenced participant-researcher interactions in the two studies.

Implications and conclusion

While men and masculinities are of interest to scholars in higher education, few studies have considered the degree to which the researcher's gender might affect the outcome of research on masculinities. As we have suggested here, men may present themselves differently to male and female researchers. Given these differences in responses, we offer the following suggestions for those engaging in gender-based research.

Be mindful of gender expectations in the research process. We are not suggesting that men should only interview men or that women should only interview women. In fact, opportunities for cross-gender interviews may lead to richer responses from participants. Some of the participants may have been more introspective about masculinities in their interviews with the female researcher, simply because they did not feel the need to live up to masculine expectations. Speaking with a woman allowed some of the participants to engage in thoughtful reflection about masculinities. Some might argue that some participants were less forthcoming with the female researcher, particularly on topics which they feared might offend her. Conversely, the men who were interviewed by the male researcher may have exaggerated their masculine behavior in the study. We cannot say for certain who obtained the more 'truthful' responses, or if perhaps both sets of responses represent different facets of the male identity. We simply advise other researchers to be cognizant of the role that gender plays in the research process.

Consider using mixed-gender research teams. Given that each study was conducted in isolation, we cannot definitively conclude that our identities shaped participant responses. However, we suspect that the different responses might be partially attributed to our own gender. Those who are interested in exploring this phenomenon further might use mixed-gender research teams. Using the same protocol, male and female researchers might interview male and female participants and compare their responses. Of course, there are a variety of other elements which might shape participant responses, including researcher's experience, participant's engagement with the topic, and so on. Using mixed-gender research teams will allow researchers to gain a more holistic picture of men's gender identities and performance.

Be reflexive about one's own gender performance in the research process. Although we have spent the majority of this article discussing the ways that participants shape their behavior, researchers also engage in gender performance. The key is to be aware of moments of engaging in such behavior. Levinson (1998) argued that male researchers are often viewed as 'insiders' by male participants when issues concerning gender are the focus of the inquiry. Conversely, women conducting gender-related research with male subjects often encounter barriers and are treated as 'outsiders' (Gurney, 1985). While having insider status facilitates rapport and trust-building with participants, and being an outsider allows the investigator to maintain a critical perspective, scholars who engage in gender-related research must always be mindful of the ways in which their own genders influence their interactions with research participants. Recording thoughts, critical moments, and other key observations immediately following data collection sessions may help to facilitate critical reflection.

Arminio and Hultgren (2002) and other constructionists researchers argued that the meanings and outcomes of research are produced in partnership between researchers and participants. Our findings suggest that gender and gender norms played a role in shaping what we learned about university men and masculinities in the two studies. While each researcher obtained different responses, we suggest that participants may simply have played up different aspects of their identities. Given our findings, we advise researchers to be reflective about the content and focus of their studies and to take steps to mitigate the ways in which participants might perform during data collection.

Note

1. We note that we rely primarily on binary conceptualizations (e.g. 'male/female' and 'man/woman') in our discussion of gender in this manuscript. However, we acknowledge that gender scholars (e.g. Butler, 2004; Connell, 2005) have advocated more inclusive views of gender that recognizes the range and diversity of gender performance.

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