

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Shepard, Mathew J.L. (2013) "Removing the Mask: Using Masculine Identity Development in Student Conduct," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 34, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol34/iss1/12>

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Removing the Mask: Using Masculine Identity Development in Student Conduct

Mathew J. L. Shepard

Research showing men's overrepresentation in student conduct processes (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005) provides relevance for using masculine identity theory in student conduct administration. By connecting literature regarding student conduct with that of masculinity in college men, specifically focusing on Edwards and Jones's (2009) grounded theory, implications for student conduct administrators to better support students are suggested.

American institutions of higher education have historically held student discipline as one of their primary functions. Under the notion of *in loco parentis*, institutions took a vested interest in, and authoritative control of, student behavior (Cohen & Kisker, 2009). Over time, student affairs professionals began to strive for educating students both academically and developmentally (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949). As part of this movement, *in loco parentis* deteriorated and institutions relaxed their punitive philosophies and shifted toward sanctioning students with more educational goals. The idea of educational purpose theory “defines the student-institutional relationship as an educational function and limits its authority to behavior that is related to the institution’s purpose of its educational mission” (Dannells, 1997, p. 21).

Much literature exists detailing the history and rise of authority of campus conduct processes, yet there is a lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness and impact of conduct administration on students. Dannells (1997) called for research in student discipline with regard to institutional program effectiveness, disciplinary counseling, student behavior, and the impact of student culture on behavior. Furthermore, he argued for increased usage of student development theories in student discipline as a means to better develop the whole student. Reviewing recent masculine identity development literature with a student conduct lens reveals implications for student conduct administrators to better support college men.

Mathew J. L. Shepard is a second-year Higher Education & Student Affairs graduate student at the University of Vermont. He received his B.A. in Economics and Environmental Studies from the University of Kansas in 2011. His research interests include social class identities, enrollment management, and supporting men on campus. He is currently an Assistant Residence Director in the Department of Residential Life at the University of Vermont.

Men in Student Conduct Processes

Harper, Harris, and Mmeje (2005) demonstrated that men are disproportionately more likely than other students to break campus policies and appear in the student conduct process. This overrepresentation of men indicates that the student conduct process presents opportunities to create meaningful experiences, provided that conduct administrators are knowledgeable about men's issues. Since college men commit a disproportionately large number of campus policy violations, especially those involving physical and sexual assault, addressing masculine identity in conduct administration with appropriate knowledge of current research and theory could potentially improve campuses for not only men, but for all members of the community (Edwards & Jones, 2009).

In his overview of student discipline, Dannells (1997) noticed that the majority of students who were entering the conduct process were traditionally aged first- and second-year men. Harper et al. (2005) supported this observation and added that "some male undergraduates, to varying degrees, willingly disregard campus policies and risk being subjected to judicial sanctioning. Sudden freedom from parents and living on one's own only intensifies this problem" (p. 570). Dannells (1997) suggested that another factor affecting younger college men's disproportionate representation in conduct processes was a lack of cognitive and identity development. This concept led Ludeman (2004) to conclude that:

It would seem beneficial...for student affairs practitioners and male college students to understand better how gender roles and socialization affect male students in the collegiate environment in order to proactively intervene at early stages of misconduct to prevent increasingly disruptive patterns of behavior. (p. 77)

To help college men become cognizant of society's expectations of manhood and their own actions and beliefs, it is helpful for educators to be competent in theories regarding the creation and development of masculine identities.

Masculine Identity in College Men

Past student development research conducted by studying only college men, has been thought to describe the development of masculine identities, but the resulting models were not constructed with a gendered lens and thus are inadequate to serve as theories for masculine development (Davis & Laker, 2004). Davis and Laker (2004) warn that ineffective use of these models for masculine development "leads to either reliance on stereotypical gender scripts or failure to consider men as gendered beings. Both are problematic and unprofessional" (p. 49).

Social Context and Influences

Similar to racial, socioeconomic, sexual, and other social identities, students' previous interactions with, knowledge of, and experiences in their gender identities greatly impact their perceptions and misperceptions of their identities (Harper et al., 2005). Men's peer groups attempt to mirror society's expectations of manhood and ostracize those who do not act and behave within the socially constructed hegemony. Popular culture portrays men as physically strong, emotionally limited, and sexually active—perceptions perpetuated through peer groups, sports, and the media, thus becoming “a core component of the male identity” (Harper et al., 2005, p. 574). These influences impact colleges and universities, which underscores the potential for institutions of higher education to impact not only the social constructions of masculinity, but also their power to help students create their own individualized construction of what being a man entails (Harris, 2008).

Masculine Identity Development Theory

Edwards and Jones (2009) conducted interviews with undergraduate men who represented a variety of identities (i.e. race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and campus involvement) at a large, public, research university on the East Coast. Each man was interviewed three times with the following research questions framing the discussions: “(a) How do college men come to understand themselves as men; (b) how does this understanding of what it means to be a man change over time, if at all; and (c) what are the critical influences on this process?” (Edward & Jones, 2009, p. 212). The study resulted in a theory which attempts to explain a process some men navigate to overcome hegemonic definitions of masculinity.

The study affirmed the socialization of the participants to cultural expectations of them as men (Harris & Edwards, 2010). These expectations set “very narrow, rigid, and limiting ways of being a man...expectations were not just about who men were supposed to be but also about who they couldn't be, such as gay, feminine, or vulnerable” (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 214-215). The participants were socialized throughout their lives, practically beginning at birth with simple expectations such as wearing blue, playing with action figures, and participating in sports. Society's ideals grew in complexity from additional expectations such as suppressing emotions, maintaining competitiveness, gaining physical strength, and breaking rules.

Men in Edwards and Jones's (2009) study spoke about living up to society's expectations as a form of performance. The first phase of this performance describes men facing increased pressures to conform to hegemonic expectations of masculinity. Men in the study felt as though they needed to put on a “mask” in order to be

perceived as men (Edward & Jones, 2009, p. 214). This need to perform comes from students' desires to conceal their personal inadequacies relative to the social construction of masculinity; needing to put on the mask occurs both intentionally as well as unintentionally to the student.

The second phase involves male students wearing the mask and performing to meet the expectations of men (Edwards & Jones, 2008). A similar stage is also described in Harris's (2008) study in which he refers to men's performance as hyper-masculinity which "encompasses the exaggerated behaviors and attitudes the participants employed strategically to express a stereotypical male gender identity" (p. 464). These performances include, but are not limited to, the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, engaging in misogynistic and homophobic behavior, breaking rules, and academic disinterest (Harris & Struve, 2009). College men spoke of performing these hypermasculine acts to gain acceptance to peer groups and to feel a sense of belonging, but such actions result in consequences (Harris, 2008).

The third phase is men realizing the consequences of wearing the mask and performing to meet society's expectations (Edwards & Jones, 2009). Consequences of performing to the hegemonic tradition of masculinity identity: policy and rule violations, the degradation of women, and the lack of meaningful relationships with women and other men, such as peers and family members (Harper et al., 2005). Edwards and Jones (2009) explain that men in their study experienced a loss of identity "and sacrificed some of their humanity by denying aspects of who they really were" (p. 219). This loss of self was not apparent while participating in hypermasculine behavior; it was later that men became aware of the conflict between actions and personal beliefs and values. This realization resulted in feelings of regret, shame, confusion, and disappointment. These emotions trigger the process in which men attempt to overcome hegemonic masculinity (Edwards & Jones, 2009).

Beginning to accept the ways in which the traditional concept of masculinity does not match their personal values and beliefs, described in the study as "accepting how the mask does not fit" (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 215), is the final stage of development for these men. Participants used these recognitions as starting points for finding ways of overcoming detrimental societal expectations, and eventually developed personal definitions of masculinity that allowed them to maintain their image of a man within more acceptable parameters. In both the Edwards and Jones (2009) and the Harris (2008) study, men listed a variety of specific events and individuals that aided their attempts to transcend the hegemonic definition of masculinity. These influences included academic courses (especially courses in women's studies), violent familial relationships, romantic relationships, and exposure to alternative masculinities, such as gay men, transgender men, and men with disabilities. Participants in the Edwards and Jones (2009) study described

their experiences with the research interviewers as beneficial to their reframing of masculinity, as interviews allowed for reflection on their masculine identities and behaviors on a regular basis.

It is important to note positive attributes associated with masculinity. Participants in a similar study with greater representation of junior and senior students described expectations of manhood that are viewed positively, such as “‘good character,’ ‘respect,’ and ‘integrity.’ [The students] also characterized manhood as ‘doing the right thing’ even when peers and circumstances encouraged otherwise” (Harris, 2008, p. 469). Despite the participants naming these traits as part of the social construction of masculinity, they reported hypermasculine actions performed by themselves and peers that were not in line with these values as typical masculine behavior (Harris, 2008).

Implications for Student Conduct Administrators

The overrepresentation of men in campus conduct cases, and the actions that put them in the process, are of serious concern to student affairs administrators (Ludeman, 2004). Although Harper et al. (2005) advocated that interventions with men need to be developed to encourage college men to express inner values and beliefs and to discuss perceptions of manhood as well as to provide examples of positive masculinity, few campuses provide such experiences (Harris & Struve, 2009). Since research shows that the majority of students interacting with student conduct processes are men, conduct administrators have an opportunity to intervene with negative manifestations of masculinity and attempt to promote positive masculine identity development.

Student conduct administrators sanction policy violators with goals of educating students about their actions’ consequences, preventing future infractions of policies, and helping students through issues that lead to negative behavior, which include issues with masculine identity (Harper et al., 2005). As Dannells (1997) suggested, “perhaps [student conduct administrators] need to reframe [their] approach...wherein the student’s behavior is critically examined in a supportive relationship and the central goal of the process is to see what can be learned from the situation” (p. vi). In order to meaningfully engage and address the developmental needs of college men in conduct processes, three criteria for interacting with students are suggested: (1) interventions need to be grounded in theory and research about masculine identity, (2) administrators need to understand that all men are different and unique, and (3) men must be given adequate challenge as well as support (Davis and Laker, 2004).

Conduct administrators need to be knowledgeable of current student identity concepts, issues, research, and applications, as well as the social construction of

identities, in order to understand the expectations students face from society and thus of themselves (Waryold & Lancaster, 2008). Understanding these topics helps conduct affairs practitioners answer the question of whether to “respond to the behavior [of men] as a character flaw, or as an artifact of absorbing the gendered messages consistently reinforced in the culture” (Davis & Laker, 2004, p. 50). Switching views from “Why did you break the rules?” to “Why did you try to fit in?” requires understanding how society restricts men to socially defined masculine roles. By understanding the process through which identity develops into transcendence of societal expectations, conduct administrators can better shape their questions and interactions with men into more meaningful conversations (Waryold & Lancaster, 2008). Another practical application of understanding literature on college men comes from Davis and Laker (2004):

Instead of relying on the popular myth that men are simply inexpressive, student affairs professionals should consider how physical activity might be used to promote men’s expression.... Student affairs professionals should consider engaging men in action-oriented activities such as going for a walk or some other “doing” activity in order to get beyond the mask of masculinity. (p. 51)

Knowledge of issues facing college men reveals strategies for creating more conducive environments for all members of the campus community. Theories and research on identity development should be incorporated into training for all student conduct administrators.

Davis and Laker (2004) suggested that to avoid generalizing the actions and motives of one or a few men to all men who violate similar policies, administrators must understand that all men are different. Administrators must not assume what identity, masculine or another, is the most salient or influential identity for a student at any time, including the moments surrounding a specific incident or behavior (Davis & Laker, 2004). Educators need to ask questions and allow for adequate reflection in order for the student to determine which identity influenced their actions, guiding the discussion to a more meaningful outcome. Furthermore, conduct affairs administrators need to understand their own identities and remain cognizant of personal biases and feelings. Policy violations may include misogynistic and homophobic actions or comments, and conduct administrators that identify with these targeted groups must remain developmentally in line with their knowledge of masculine identity development (Davis & Laker, 2004).

The third criterion suggested by Davis and Laker (2004) is that student conduct administrators must provide challenge and support. According to Kegan (1982), as cited in Davis and Laker (2004), men need to feel a sense of confirmation, which “can take the form of identifying commonalities with the student; estab-

lishing and modeling ground rules for respectful listening; affirming that it's OK to be uninformed and confused; and identifying misinformation, stereotypes, or assumptions" (p. 53). Framing a safe environment in student conduct hearings is vital for authenticity and effectiveness of an intervention. This can be created by emphasizing the separation of the student's actions from the character of the student, disclosing examples of the administrator's personal struggles with identity and hegemony, giving men permission to express feelings and emotions, and not patronizing the student or confusing him with due process and legal terminology (Gehring, 2001). Furthermore, in an effort to provide support, conduct administrators should praise college men for what they do well. "The benefit of highlighting positive behavior is two-fold: (1) It rewards the individual or group exhibiting desired and productive behaviors, and (2) it exposes conflicted students to healthy role models" (Harper et al., 2005, p. 581). The reinforcement of men's positive behaviors assists in college men's attempts to create personal, healthier, definitions of masculinity (Edwards & Jones, 2009).

It is important for college men to receive continued, regular support from peer groups that affirm positive behaviors after the student conduct process (Harper et al., 2005). Creating and sanctioning college men to attend support groups that discuss masculinity in an open, safe environment provide men struggling with hypermasculine tendencies with resources and guidance from other men allowing a deeper understanding of masculine issues. Sanctioning college men to attend men's group meetings, interviewing male leaders on campus, such as resident advisors or men formerly in the conduct process, and meeting with a professional specializing in men's issues can help college men redefine their masculine identities. Groups such as peer conduct boards, in which students are adjudicating conduct hearings, and organized student groups also provide exposure to positive behavior, provided that men are adequately represented.

Conduct administrators may find continued support for college men's identity development in parents if parental messages mirror the communications of the institution (Harper et al., 2005). Parental notifications triggered by alcohol and drug violations may start the discussion about student behavior, but these conversations are further supported by coupling notification letters with information about campus resources and advice for how to discuss such behavior concerns with students. Follow-up correspondence to parents could help keep parents involved in discussions with their students about actions and masculine identity.

In addition to these applications, further research of the effectiveness of student conduct processes in college men's development will provide insight into how to best approach negative behavior. Research exploring the intersections of identities in men, as well as the critiques of existing theories, will create a more holistic view of men's issues.

Conclusion

College and university student conduct systems have developed from a punitive process to striving for educational outcomes. As men continue to be overrepresented in issues of student conduct, it is pertinent for conduct administrators to understand the social construction of masculinity and theories that describe how college men develop positive, individualized definitions of their identities. By applying knowledge of identity development and supporting and challenging college men both during and after conduct hearings, administrators can create more effective, meaningful interventions. These practices educate men of the societal expectations placed upon them and promote the removal of the hypermasculine mask through the development of men's personal redefinitions of manhood.

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