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# **“I Wanted to Raise My Hand and Say I’m Not a Feminist”: College Men’s Use of Hybrid Masculinities to Negotiate Attachments to Feminism and Gender Studies**

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## **Abstract**

Using a hybrid masculinities framework, we qualitatively analyzed 15 college men’s experiences with feminism and gender scholarship in Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) courses. Men described adopting particular strategies of discourse in their social interactions to manage varied reactions to feminism and gender studies. As a way of justifying their choice of academic study, these men also learned to navigate social relationships by highlighting or downplaying their own masculinity (i.e., creating or deconstructing a hybrid masculinity). Finally, men reconciled the multiple meanings of feminism and WGS studies by drawing from dominant cultural norms and expectations in attempts to make sense of the incongruence of men studying feminism. Implications for future research and college campuses and educators are considered.

**Keywords:** college men, feminism, Women’s and Gender Studies, hybrid masculinities

The role of men in feminism has been widely debated by scholars across academic disciplines. Although men possess a gendered identity and this can create unique experiences when intersected with other social locations

such as race, class, and sexuality, the study of gender has traditionally been dubbed a “women’s issue” and is popularly believed to exclude men (Kimmel, 1987). Some men may view feminism as a means of disempowering manhood, whereas some women could perceive men in feminism as a threat to an ideology that uniquely empowers women in a patriarchal society (Kimmel, 1998). The growth of the field of men and masculinities has led to men’s greater involvement in feminism and gender studies as a whole (Kaufman, 1999; Newton, 2002). As a result, scholars have attempted to make feminism more mainstream and accessible for privileged men (Kaufman & Kimmel, 2011) and men who desire to be feminist allies (Bridges, 2010; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015). There remains, however, a notable lack of understanding surrounding how men navigate their involvement with studying feminism and gender and how the nuances of their experiences affect their social worlds.

In particular, the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) in the United States seeks to understand gender inequality and its intersections with other forms of oppression and difference (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability) and thus may act as an introduction to feminist ideology. Research indicates that women who enroll in these courses develop broader understandings of social inequality and report a stronger dedication to feminist social justice (Katz, Swindell, & Farrow, 2004). In contrast, men’s commitment to feminism and subscription to feminist principles may actually decrease after completing a women’s studies course (Thomsen, Basu, & Reinitz, 1995). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how men specifically shape their conceptualizations of gendered issues and attachments to feminism.

This study explores how college men who have taken WGS courses negotiate their engagement with feminist ideals in their social lives and the ways in which their involvement with gender studies interacts with their masculine identities. Drawing from 15 in-depth, qualitative interviews, we ask the following question: How do college men establish and navigate their attachment to feminism and the broader study of gendered issues? This microanalysis highlights how a group of men on a Midwestern, predominantly White college campus identifies with feminism and gender studies and how masculine identities, social relationships, and cultural stereotypes complicate these processes. We find that these men enlist certain strategies to justify their interests in gender studies and feminism in their social lives in different ways, including enacting forms of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993). The findings presented here are important for those committed to engaging with both women and men on issues related to gender and feminism within academic and wider social contexts.

## **Men in WGS**

WGS courses were first offered at American universities and colleges in the 1960s (Reynolds, Shagle, & Venkataraman, 2007), and their scope includes majors and courses in a variety of disciplines (Berger & Radeloff, 2014). Much research has confirmed the liberalizing effect of WGS courses in making students more aware of social inequality (Case, 2007; Katz et al., 2004; Messner et al., 2015; Stake & Hoffmann, 2001). A large body of research has also focused on the beneficial effects of WGS courses on college-aged men's and women's attitudes surrounding gender ideology and gender roles (Case, 2007), though men are in the significant numerical minority (Flood, 2011). Although this research highlights the positive outcomes experienced by students in general, its focus is largely on quantitative assessments of student learning. Therefore, much less is known about the unique, qualitative influence that WGS courses may have specifically on men in developing their interest in feminism and gender studies and how they translate this information outside of academia into their everyday social interactions.

Men's experiences with WGS courses and the broader study of feminism are multifaceted (Alilunas, 2011; Flood, 2011). Several studies highlight the need for further inquiry into the unique impact gender studies may have on young adult men. Thomsen and colleagues (1995) found that men's subscription to feminist attitudes actually decreased upon completing a WGS course, whereas women's attachment to feminism grew. In addition, some men in women's studies courses may develop a resistant stance toward feminism that upholds their personal sense of privilege (Pleasants, 2011).

The presence and involvement of men in gender scholarship is a complex phenomenon that can broaden men's perceptions of inequality, while possibly reinforcing norms of gender essentialism (Flood, 2011). Based on the various names adopted within the field itself (i.e., women's studies or WGS), men may be deterred from enrolling (Berila, Keller, Krone, Laker, & Mayers, 2005), despite the fact that WGS courses address how all people are gendered and that content on masculinity and men is integrated into many courses (Gaffney & Manno, 2011). In addition, college students often associate negative connotations with the label of "feminism" (Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Moi, 2006), which could act as another barrier to enrollment in WGS courses.

## **Men's Involvement in Feminism**

The relationship between men and the struggle for gender equality has been wrought with tensions and difficult questions concerning men's roles and

responsibilities (Heath, 1987). With the inception of feminism, various men's groups fought against the perceived threat of gender equality and women's empowerment by fostering cultures of traditional masculinity (Clatterbaugh, 2000). Meanwhile, men in support of feminism worked to cooperate with the goals of gender equity (Bridges, 2010; Harding, 1998; Kimmel, 1987). The institutionalized nature of feminism allows men allies to contribute through antiviolence activism and new professional opportunities (Messner et al., 2015). Men who claim a profeminist label support feminism but do not adopt the feminist label because they argue that they cannot experience what it is to be a woman in society (Clatterbaugh, 2000; Harding, 1998; Kimmel, 1997). In their work interviewing three cohorts of men contributing to feminist activism, Messner et al. (2015) intentionally called their participants "allies" to avoid contentious labeling. Furthermore, profeminist men may experience difficulty maintaining meaningful relationships with men who do not share these principles and instead choose to distance themselves from misogynist peers (Schmitt, 1998). Indeed, certain traits are linked to men's positive identification with feminism, such as being young (Messner et al., 2015), more highly educated, and having a mother who worked outside the home (Rhodebeck, 1996).

There are, however, certain obstacles to men's involvement in feminism. Namely, these include stereotypes that emasculate men who identify as feminists, such as the idea that male feminists forfeit being a "man" as a result of their feminist leanings (Digby, 1998; Stoltenberg, 1989). Anderson (2009), for example, found that the term "feminist man" was attributed to fewer stereotypically masculine characteristics and was viewed as considerably less heterosexual when compared with just the term "man" by college students. Haddock and Zanna (1994) revealed that authoritarian, politically conservative men tend to subscribe to more negative beliefs regarding the symbolism of feminism and its followers. Rigid gender norms simultaneously serve to inhibit men's acceptance in feminism, while they can also facilitate understandings of gender inequality.

Although there is more room for men's participation in feminist activism in what Messner and colleagues (2015) called "plug in" opportunities, particularly with regard to antiviolence, there remain questions regarding men's visibility in such settings, especially in light of the institutionalization of feminism. Bridges (2010) found that men who dress in drag for "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" events to protest violence against women "gendered feminism" in problematic ways. At these events, men show their support by selectively (and inauthentically) adopting feminist ideals, presuming gender equality as a feminine issue, and failing to see sexuality and gender as socially constructed. Men's roles in women-led social movements remain challenging in understanding how to promote gender equality without reinforcing masculine privilege and hierarchies (Macomber, 2015).

Men who identify as profeminist must come to terms with their sense of masculinity and critically address their sources of privilege in a cultural context that exalts stereotypical notions of manhood (Pease, 2000). Recognizing this privilege by advantaged groups (e.g., White, heterosexual men) may only serve to push the blame for inequalities onto other minority or stigmatized groups. Harding (1998) contended that attention has been placed on multicultural and global feminism, and described how this more expansive focus may shed light on men's feminist subjectivities. Missing here is the notion that awareness (i.e., education) and access to resources (i.e., political influence and money) are necessary to enact change. Although these tools are not widely available to disadvantaged, stigmatized groups, Messner and colleagues (2015) noted that male allies in the women's antiviolence movement have become increasingly racially diverse since the 1970s. These changes highlight the growing diversity within feminism, such as men of color, whose paths to feminist activism are not academic, but instead stem from their lived experiences with issues such as community violence.

### **Hybrid Masculinities and Men in Feminism and Gender Studies**

In this microanalysis, we draw on the concept of hybrid masculinities to explore men's involvement in both feminism and gender studies, and the ways in which they perceive their experiences to have shaped their lives and social interactions. Broadly, "hybrid masculinities" are made up of a "selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246). Hybrid masculinities are common among young men from privileged social backgrounds (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), which could relate to processes of identity development and exploration in youth. Specifically, college-aged men are in unique positions to construct hybrid hegemonic masculinities that appropriate feminine characteristics as a way of maintaining patriarchal hierarchies of power (Arxer, 2011), including acceptance of negative attitudes toward women and rape myths (Lutz-Zois, Moler, & Brown, 2015). As privileged identities (e.g., White, middle-class, heterosexual males) take on characteristics of lesser identities (e.g., women), men's feminist ideologies may work to reify gendered inequalities rather than challenge them. Through the development of hybrid masculinities, men may obscure the degree to which masculine identities are shifting in a more feminist direction and instead be contributing to a transformed definition of what it means to be stereotypically masculine (and privileged).

Hybrid masculinities is a useful framework for understanding men's experiences in feminized contexts and involvement with female-dominated

fields wherein men's gendered identities are accentuated, including feminist ideology and teachings. Varying social settings and environments complicate men's engagement with hybrid masculinities by shaping their strategic decisions surrounding impression management and identity construction. The WGS classroom, which is predominantly occupied by women, presents opportunities for men to draw from their marginalized identities, such as being gay or a man of color, to gain legitimacy and counter their masculine privilege (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). Furthermore, men in homosocial settings can reinforce gendered power and create hybrid masculinities by co-opting marginalized, feminine traits, such as emotional sensitivity in romantic relationships (Arxer, 2011), or utilize particular gay aesthetics (i.e., being well-groomed, having polite manners; Bridges, 2014) to reap hegemonic rewards. In more inclusive, unconstrained social settings, such as the Internet, male personal style bloggers can embrace socially feminized traits, allowing for the construction of hybrid masculinities through an outward rejection of hegemonic norms of masculinity (Whitmer, 2016).

Despite the growing presence of men in nonconventional social settings where they can hybridize different forms of masculinity, the prevailing cultural standard of idealized, stereotypical masculinity is imposed on all men, and these norms call for men to separate themselves from anything construed as feminine (Connell, 1995; Kaufman, 1999). Because of the dominance of this form of masculinity, it is often referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995). One of the consequences of this privileged form of masculinity is that certain types of masculinities and men (as well as all femininities and women) are devalued (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, those who are outside the bounds of culturally normative standards of masculinity, such as gay men or men who identify as feminists, may have the potential to reshape masculinity and embrace a more expansive understanding of its multiple meanings (Heasley, 2005). Nevertheless, a key element within hybrid masculinities is that even by acknowledging privilege, it does not cease to exist. Rather, exerting this privilege by attempting to evoke less valued identities may instead work as a barrier to gender equality. Thus, a hybrid masculinities framework can shed light on how men create individualized, complex understandings of feminism and gender studies.

## **Method**

The present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore young men's involvement in feminism and gender studies from their own perspectives. We used purposive, criterion sampling to recruit men who had enrolled in and completed at least one WGS course at a public university in the Midwest to ensure a sample of men who were engaged with gender studies and

feminism on some level. To recruit men, we used snowball sampling through participants' social network referrals, recruitment flyers posted across campus, and emails advertising the study forwarded to campus listservs.

Fifteen cisgender men participated in semistructured, face-to-face interviews conducted by the first author, lasting from 0.5 to 1.5 hr. Men's ages ranged from 19 to 35 years ( $M = 25$ ). All but one respondent self-identified as White. Seven (47%) respondents identified as heterosexual, six identified as gay (40%), one as queer (7%), and one as pansexual (7%). Participants had completed an average of four WGS classes (ranging from one to seven), which covered interdisciplinary topics such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies; women in historical contexts; and gendered religious studies.

Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions revolving around the totality of their experiences with studying gender, both in the classroom and in their personal lives. Grand tour questions included the following: How did you become interested in taking a WGS course? How did your family and friends react to you studying WGS? Interview questions encouraged respondents to share information on their background in gender studies and how this influenced their social interactions. The institutional review board at the second author's institution approved this project, and all respondents provided written informed consent. All interviews took place at a location at the convenience and choice of the respondent and were conducted by the first author, who identifies as a woman. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and stored on an encrypted server, and all respondents were assigned pseudonyms.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into the qualitative data analysis program, QDA Miner, in which data analyses were performed. First, initial coding was used to determine emergent themes and categories that corresponded with concepts of interest (Charmaz, 2014). Next, focused coding was used to hone in on men's interpretations of gender studies and feminism. The final themes emerged inductively from the data itself and were derived from clusters of codes corresponding with broader themes and patterns.

## Findings

Three overarching themes emerged within the framework of hybrid masculinities that captured men's diverse conceptions of their attachment to feminist ideology and their involvement in gender studies: *managing acceptance and disapproval in feminism and gender studies*, *navigating masculinity in social relationships*, and *reconciling the multiple meanings of feminism and gender studies*. These themes surround the central assumption that men

engaging with feminism and gender studies is a rare occurrence that is generally met with confusion and lack of understanding from other people (Kimmel, 1998). This social tension can lead men to critically evaluate, and create (or resist) a hybrid masculinity, depending on the social interaction and context (e.g., Bridges, 2010). Although the men in this study described similar experiences based on their scholarly involvement with gender studies, our findings are not meant to represent a monolithic depiction of all men who study feminist ideology. Rather, they provide a multidimensional, nuanced microanalysis of the diverse ways college-aged men encounter the study of feminism and gender through the creation of hybrid masculine identities.

### ***Managing Acceptance and Disapproval in Feminism and Gender Studies***

These college men utilized certain techniques to manage both accepting and disapproving reactions to their feminism and gender studies. First, several felt it necessary to distance themselves from those who combated their ideologies, whereas others surrounded themselves with peers who shared their feminist or profeminist stances (Schmitt, 1998). Because feminist men tend to be more educated (Rhodebeck, 1996), and men likely to create hybrid masculinities are young, White, and also educated (Arxer, 2011; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), these privileges allow for a stronger line of defense for both WGS coursework and feminist attitudes. Nevertheless, in ways discussed in the literature (e.g., Kimmel, 1998), we find that many men in our study also experienced social challenges to their association with feminism and gender studies, which prompted them to resist hybrid masculinities in response.

Broadly referring to public perceptions of gender studies, Matthew described how a cultural opposition to WGS shaped his social interactions:

There's always kind of been a resistance to it [WGS]. It's one of those things where unless somebody's actually taken a WGS class it's usually pretty hard for me to communicate with them about different ideas and concepts just because there are a lot of stereotypes associated with them.

By avoiding conversations with people he knew to be disconnected from WGS teachings, Matthew took on a more passive approach to establish his hybrid masculinity. Another respondent, Bobby, spoke about his experience defending feminist ideologies when a work colleague displayed ignorance about transgender identities, a topic discussed in his WGS coursework. Bobby says he wanted to "throw [my coworker] all the Women's Studies course material and be like, 'You're an idiot.'" Although Bobby did not identify as transgender, he sought to transform his privileged, normative masculinity into a type

of hybrid masculinity by taking on the role of an ally and standing up for the rights of marginalized people through the knowledge he developed in WGS.

Other men discussed the difficulties of expressing their hybrid masculine identities when managing the social negativity from peers and family surrounding WGS and feminism. Eric's peers used his gender studies background as a way to get under his skin:

People are trying to be casually sexist or misogynistic and it's like "I don't understand why they're doing that" ... They seem to do it on purpose around me because they know I'm interested in feminist theory so they can joke about it.

Joking and ridicule from peers worked to delegitimize Eric's endeavor to establish his hybrid masculinity as a man studying feminist theory. Much like Matthew above, Eric's negative interactions prompted him to distance himself from his peers as a way to better manage his hybrid masculinity and associations with feminism (Schmitt, 1998).

Norman was especially cognizant of his family's negative views of feminism:

But my parents, they still have misconceived notions of what feminism is ... they see it as these bra-burners, man-haters. And that's feminism to them ... I think they respected what I did, and they never said anything negative about it, but I think that they didn't really care to understand it, either.

By devaluing their son's involvement in studying feminism, Norman's hybrid masculine identity was ignored and seemingly erased within his family's antiquated beliefs about feminism (Kimmel, 1987). Both Eric (gay) and Norman's (heterosexual) experiences underscore the social barriers men can experience as a result of their hybrid masculinities, regardless of sexual orientation, when garnering acceptance for their beliefs and studies from their social relationships. The social resistance these men faced in their pursuit of studying gender illustrates the marginalization they experienced in constructing hybrid masculinities and the difficulties of coping with hegemonic norms of masculinity (Guckenheimer & Schmidt, 2013; Heasley, 2005).

Men in this study consciously constructed a variety of approaches on the spectrum of hybrid masculinities to combat social negativity surrounding feminism and gender studies. Several men adopted a passive, hands-off approach to managing adverse reactions from family or friends, as they did not feel compelled to hybridize their masculinities to achieve social acceptance among like-minded social circles that shared similar beliefs concerning gender and feminism. One such example is Steven who explained,

“When I was taking those [WGS] classes, it wasn’t like I would come home and share what I learned with my family ... I was just doing my own thing as far as learning and developing.” Other men chose to surround themselves with like-minded peers and avoid socializing with people who they believed would hold negative views of feminism (Schmitt, 1998), such as Carl who states, “I don’t have any friends who are like, antifeminist or would reject something like gender studies.”

In a similar way, John described how reactions from peers related to his taking WGS classes map onto a more liberal mind-set associated with higher education:

Usually it’s either neutral or good—neutral from people that I would expect it to be negative, and good from everyone else. Most people would play it off as normal, ’cause the people I’m telling this to are also college students, so they’re like, “Whatever it’s just another class.”

By separating their gender scholarship from disapproving social contexts, these men sought to avoid interactions with people that could lead to critical stereotypical assessments of either feminism or the study of gender. Through this hands-off approach, these men were not required to exert hybrid masculine identities because their primarily liberal college student social circles were accepting and uncritical of their involvement in WGS.

Neil took a uniquely pedagogical approach in his discussions of feminism. He found there is a certain “way you have to talk about it to people because you don’t want to shut them down.” In his experience in talking about feminism, it was difficult to introduce subjects like privilege without essentialist notions about gender and biology coming up in conversation. Talking with people who lack previous knowledge of feminist and gender scholarship requires a specific set of tools (and patience) to be taken seriously that he attributed to learning through his WGS coursework. By utilizing his “tools and techniques,” as well as having awareness of “those different perspectives,” Neil managed to make teaching moments out of frustrating conversations. Indeed, as Norman put it, “awareness is the first step.” Both Neil and Norman were advanced gender scholars who were able to utilize their 4 or more years of WGS education in their pedagogical social strategies, as well as their development of hybrid masculinities. Although these men exerted the traditionally masculine traits of leadership and authority in conversations to clearly communicate feminist ideas, they did so as educated individuals in hopes of informing others on issues of gender inequality (Rhodebeck, 1996).

A number of men also highlighted the complex reactions from family members to their involvement in gender studies and their displays of hybrid

masculinities, ranging on a continuum from acceptance to rejection. One such example is Brian, who described very supportive reactions from his family members: "My family was pretty excited about it. They were interested. My mom was pretty thrilled and my step-dad was a professor at the university ... so he's a pretty big fan of learning." In many ways, familial political ideologies shaped their reactions to men's engagement in gender studies. According to Daniel, his family environment fostered a sense of social acceptance and diversity that related to their support: "My parents have always been fairly liberal and progressive, and equality was always a really big thing growing up ... I have really supportive parents, and they love that I'm a feminist." By extending their support for the academic study of gender, these men's families fostered a welcoming academic environment, despite Daniel's contradiction to predominant gender norms (Guckenheimer & Schmidt, 2013; Heasley, 2005). In these men's experiences, exposure to supportive family networks fostered environments conducive to creating hybrid masculinities that appropriate marginalized identities, such as being a feminist.

Conversely, other men, such as Lance, noted distinctly negative reactions from their parents in response to their academic studies and attempts to adopt a hybrid masculinity:

My family is pretty traditional in their way of thinking, so like to come home and talk about things that I found really interesting in [WGS] class was not met with a lot of enthusiasm ... so I didn't really get very far with my family.

In other cases, men included their family members in their scholarly pursuit of gender. As Scott described,

I had talked to family members about it and just said "Hey, I'm looking at taking more women's courses and that kind of thing" and they saw it as a positive thing so I think for them, too, it was kind of that eye-opening experience.

For Scott, the novelty of his enrollment in a WGS course developed into a shared journey of familial learning, which bolstered his sense of a hybrid masculinity that rested on mutual support. On the contrary, Lance experienced detachment and rejection from his family in response to his studying WGS, which constrained his ability within his familial interactions to construct a hybrid masculinity that openly incorporated feminist ideology. These varied reactions from family members underline the complexity these men faced in managing both anticipated and perceived resistance to their study of gender and feminism.

### ***Navigating Masculinity in Social Relationships***

For many men, social reactions to their involvement in both feminist ideology and WGS classes placed them in positions of uncertainty where they were forced to justify their involvement in spaces, studies, and ideologies deemed “feminine.” This uncertainty necessitated specific navigational tactics regarding presentations of masculinity in their social relationships and interactions. Rich, for example, recounted his frustration in dealing with a female acquaintance who challenged his enrollment in a WGS course:

I distinctly remember one time working on a [WGS] project and having my project partner's roommate prod me about why I was taking a feminist course ... she was saying, “why do you care,” and “why are you taking a Women's and Gender Studies course,” and my response was just “why not?” You know, there's a lot of that, “why do men take gender studies courses?”

When it became known that he was a man studying WGS, Rich's hybrid masculinity was called into question, notably by a young woman.

In the following example, Rich actively resisted embodying a hybrid masculinity. Rather than allowing his manhood to be forfeited because of his WGS participation (Anderson, 2009; Digby, 1998; Stoltenberg, 1989), Rich emphasized his gender when explaining why he was taking a WGS class. Rich specifically emphasized his masculinity in his defense by arguing that “male is a gender, too, so we do have something to learn from Gender Studies classes ... we're not women, and we can always learn stuff from history, especially such an under taught field like women's history.” Through a focus on his (“male”) gender, Rich succeeded in resisting a hybrid masculinity despite his minority status as a man in WGS. He instead used his sense of normative masculinity as a means of justifying the importance of his role in studying gender.

Instances of opposition to hybrid masculinities like this were not uncommon. James similarly felt he needed to explain how his involvement in WGS fit in with his broader studies to his family, so that it made “sense” why a man would study gender:

I told my mom that I was adding a [WGS] minor to my degree and she was like “Why?” and I said, “Well, I'm mostly interested in masculinity,” and I told her my interests about how gender interacts with genocide studies so it makes sense to her.

Here, James paired his defense of WGS course with the study of genocide, a violent and therefore traditionally masculine topic, to justify his enrollment

to his mother. By minimizing the role of gender studies in his curriculum choices and stressing that his primary interests lie in studying men and masculinity, James de-feminized his WGS minor as a way to make his educational trajectory more acceptable to his family. This rejection of hybrid masculinities helped these men navigate the social pitfalls of simultaneously possessing a masculine identity and engaging in feminist academic discourse by diluting the emphasis on WGS and refocusing it on masculinity.

Other men engaged in very conscious behavioral strategies to deconstruct their hybrid identities and strengthen their masculinity in the face of incredulity to their studying WGS. Some men, like James above, chose to use a more seemingly palatable term for the classes they were taking depending on the audience: "Sometimes when I talk to my less enlightened male friends, I just tell them I'm a gender studies minor and not a Women's and Gender Studies minor." By omitting the "Women" as part of the name of the field, James believed he was potentially staving off any confusion or conflict stemming from his engagement with these courses. This calculated response to "less enlightened" social circles literally erases the feminine linguistic component of WGS and obscures men's sense of gender as a way to maintain their own hegemonic masculinity.

Eric, on the contrary, accentuated his hybrid masculinity through his marginalized sexual orientation to help his fellow graduate students make sense of his specialization in WGS, even though they failed to understand his rationale. He explained,

They find it odd that I'm taking Feminist Theory ... they think of it as Women's Studies rather than Women's and Gender Studies. Even though I'm a gay man and I've started to focus on gay man's literature, they still ask "Why are you taking those [WGS] courses?"

Even though Eric attempted to rationalize his enrollment in WGS by citing his gay identity and thus reinforcing his hybrid masculinity, his incongruent role as a man studying gender dominated his peers' perceptions of his masculinity as clashing with his scholarship. These diverse experiences of men's engagement with hybrid masculinities highlight the multifaceted ways that men utilized gendered norms of behavior to either emphasize their masculinity, as in the case of James, or stress a marginalized status, such as Eric's gay identity, in social situations that challenged their academic studies.

Men were also conscious of the various negative stereotypes surrounding the idea of men involved with feminism and gender studies (e.g., Anderson, 2009), and struggled to come to terms with these social barriers. Peer support was key in how men successfully navigated their sense of individual masculinity in gendered contexts where their presence conflicted with prevailing gender norms. Carl, for example, struggled with overcoming

what he perceived to be adverse social judgments based on his engagement with WGS classes:

The thing I was most conscious of is, "How is it perceived by my peers?" And in my Intro [WGS] class, I wasn't really that conscious of it, because it was like the two other males in the class were pretty feminist, so I was like, "Ok, great. I can be totally open about this."

Despite his fear of peer disapproval, Carl utilized masculine camaraderie to justify his participation in WGS classes and to rationalize his openness about his interest in gender studies and feminism. Carl's focus on homosocial masculinity presents a complex relationship with hybrid masculinity: Carl was willing to identify as a feminist and adopt a hybrid masculinity as long as this conformed to the dominant masculinity that was present among his male peers, much like men in homosocial settings (Arxer, 2011; Bridges, 2014). In this way, some men's adoption of a hybrid masculinity was contingent upon social context and the pervasiveness of gender norms.

Neil was also deeply cognizant of the negative cultural views surrounding men who are gender scholars:

I worry if anybody wanted to go into something in the business or corporate world, if they had a WGS degree, and you have this sort of stereotypical male boss, and he's looking for that ideal worker who has those masculine qualities and he's got this application that says your major is WGS, or feminist studies, and he's like, well you're a "soft man."

From Neil's viewpoint, men's participation in WGS and feminism is popularly believed to be at odds with stereotypical notions of masculinity (Guck-enheimer & Schmidt, 2013). Neil's example further demonstrates the precarious nature of navigating masculinities in "real world" situations like being on the job market where gendered meanings are ascribed to even the degree one receives. As a gay man, however, Neil felt that his sexual orientation labeled him "the token gay guy" in WGS classes, which led to his creation of a hybrid masculinity whereby Neil's marginalized identity afforded him credibility as a man studying feminism and gender scholarship. These examples underscore the ubiquity of cultural constructions of masculinity that position men at odds with feminist ideology and the study of gender, as well as how feminized social contexts, such as the WGS classroom, can reinforce hybrid masculinities. Therefore, men can develop hybrid masculinities as a way to counteract negative social connotations associated with feminism and studying gender.

### ***Reconciling Multiple Meanings of Feminism and Gender Studies***

Although the men in this study struggled with both their masculinity and mixed reactions from social groups in response to studying gender, their experiences also highlight personal challenges in reconciling the multiple symbolic meanings of feminism and gender studies. Men varied in their engagement with hybrid masculinities as they addressed the controversial idea of men claiming a feminist identity and were critical of both identifying as a feminist (Clatterbaugh, 2000; Harding, 1998; Kimmel, 1997) and avoiding the label altogether. Eric, for example, described his journey toward feminism and the drawbacks of claiming a feminist identity, which encouraged him to contextually construct his masculinity:

Since I started out strongly as feminist, identifying with these women writers, these feminist theorists, it seems like as I've grown older, it seems like I identify less as a feminist ... maybe I've come to have a different understanding of what it means to identify as something ... I remember once in [a WGS] class someone raised a question "We're all feminists, right?" and no one raised their hand to oppose it and I kind of wanted to raise my hand and say, "I'm not a feminist."

In the context of the WGS classroom, Eric created a hybrid masculinity and was reluctant to express his belief for fear of social disapproval from his classmates who were predominantly women.

Eric goes on to explain,

I'm just suspicious of affirming any sort of identity because the minute you affirm identity, it sort of becomes an essentializer, it becomes a definition of what it means to be a feminist and that seems problematic for me, so I'm happy to employ feminist tools but I don't want to call myself a feminist.

In other words, Eric was determined to enact feminist ideology, but refused to allow others to define him based on his beliefs alone, demonstrating the conflict he experienced between his own micro beliefs and broader macro social structures. Outside of the feminized WGS context, however, Eric resisted creating a hybrid masculinity by distancing himself from the feminist label, underscoring his vacillation with hybrid masculinities as well as the influential role of gendered expectations in feminized contexts.

Other men were more committed to creating a hybrid masculinity compared with Eric and described a similar obligation to feminist ideology, but were more open to how the label was (or was not) applied. Daniel, for example, discussed the development of his hybrid masculinity:

Do we want people to identify as feminist or do we just want them to have feminist ideals? For me, when you talk to people, like “oh I’m not a feminist,” and then you ask them “oh well do you believe this, this and this in our society.” And they say “yeah,” then it’s like then you’re a feminist. But you don’t need to attach the label I don’t think, because labels are just another way for people to tell you how you aren’t that. When I say I’m a feminist, it’s just like you’re a man, you’re this, or you’re that. It’s not what this is about. You’re trying to pick apart the language when in reality it’s just supposed to *be*.

Similar to previous research (Pease, 2002), Daniel grappled with the meaning of the label “feminist,” as well as the behavior and ideology that accompany it. In contrast to Eric above, Daniel did identify as a feminist, but acknowledged that gendered stereotypes were often attached to men who adopt the label and study gender. In a similar vein, Scott felt his presence in WGS courses was accepted because of his experiences as a gay man: “In some of the [WGS] classes I’ve been in I’ve been the only male in the class, but it’s never been a bad thing ... it could have something to do with my sexuality [being gay].” As if to say all gay men must be feminists because of the association between male homosexuality and femininity, Scott never felt stigmatized for being the only man in the classroom and therefore drew from his hybrid masculine identity to gain legitimacy from WGS peers. Although these men had diverse experiences in coming to terms with feminism and gender studies, it is clear that they tailored their hybridization strategies to distinctive social contexts and interactions.

Men who study gender and feminism may also experience conflicted feelings toward WGS stemming from their opposition to hybrid masculine identities. One such example, Lance recounted feeling that feminism and gender studies can be alienating toward men based on terminology usage (Clatterbaugh, 2000; Harding, 1998; Kimmel, 1997). He explicates by saying that

... while it says women and gender studies in the program, people see the women’s studies and it’s often just referred to as women’s studies ... and the gender and the maleness kind of drops out of the consciousness of it.

In this way, Lance was aware of how normative terms in WGS, particularly on college campuses, can reify the belief that men do not have a stake in feminism. This focus on unequal gender terminology again positions men and masculinity at the core of discussions on gender studies, which serves to deconstruct hybrid masculinity and reinforce hegemonic norms of men’s entitlement.

Other men, like Neil, acknowledged the importance of how a name can

shape people's involvements in studying gender, as he refers to the label of Women's and Gender Studies:

I don't want them to change the name because I think it serves a very useful purpose. It's supposed to promote women's issues, but at the same time by promoting that I think they push some people away. And if they change the name then they're losing that focus and I understand that conundrum.

In contrast to Lance, Neil was adamant in constructing a hybrid masculinity to promote the centrality of women in gender studies at the same time that he understood how feminized terminology can potentially be alienating. Lance and Neil's varying conceptualizations of gendered terms in feminist scholarship point to the complex symbolism of WGS and feminism and the ways that individual men can navigate these terms' meanings through their own hybrid masculinities.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates the multiple and diverse ways that young men engage with feminism and how their scholarly involvement with gender studies shapes their lives and social interactions. Specifically, college-aged men exploring their identities are uniquely situated to mold their masculinity in ways conducive to particular situations (Arxer, 2011). In many instances, men's use of hybrid masculinities, and conversely their opposition to this type of masculinity, is often closely tied to social context and their conscious decisions concerning what type of masculinity provides the most benefits in specific interactions. The young men in this study traversed the multifaceted nuances of what it means to be a man involved in feminism and the academic study of gender, resulting in complex, malleable forms of masculinity. Using hybrid masculinities, findings reveal the intricate meanings these men attached to their nonconforming behavior and the variety of social dynamics they faced resulting from their status as *men* studying WGS and *feminism*.

The men emphasized how they must *navigate* gendered norms of masculinity in their social relationships as people often responded to their scholarly pursuit of gender studies with incredulity and confusion. Similarly, many also described their nuanced experiences in *managing* both acceptance and disapproval of feminism and gender studies within their social networks. Finally, men in this study engaged in introspective journeys in *reconciling* the multiple meanings of feminism and gender studies they constructed that did not necessarily coincide with more normative feminist or mainstream

ideologies. Although the experiences of men who study gender and practice feminist ideology vary widely in terms of having positive and negative outcomes (Flood, 2011; Thomsen et al., 1995), this study recognizes their diverse backgrounds, numerous barriers, and stigma men must combat when they participate in a culturally feminized social realm.

Overall, these men's stories illustrate how men involved in WGS courses and feminist dialogue can potentially utilize their experiences to hybridize new forms of masculinity and deconstruct the widely held belief that men do not have a valid stake in the tenets of feminism (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Guckenheimer & Schmidt, 2013; Kimmel, 1998). At the same time, however, several men struggled against a hybrid masculinity by reinforcing the primacy of hegemonic norms of masculinity, which can shore up masculine privilege within feminized social arenas (Macomber, 2015; Pleasants, 2011). Findings from this study emphasize the importance of encouraging inclusive gender discourse in the broad field of gender studies (Berila et al., 2005; Gaffney & Manno, 2011), despite critiques that frame men's presence in WGS classes as problematic (Flood, 2011). Although the men reported encountering numerous oppositional viewpoints through the popular belief that men lack a legitimate role in feminism and gender studies, their stories symbolically represent a type of "undoing gender" (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987) whereby mainstream, dualistic notions of normative gender roles are directly challenged. In addition, men in this study highlight the unique struggles many men face when they attempt to come to grips with the highly stigmatized concept of feminism (Harding, 1998; Kimmel, 1997; Messner et al., 2015) or the "F-word" (Moi, 2006).

Although men involved in the study of gender and feminism possess unique potential to disrupt prevailing, stereotypical understandings of masculinity in their lives through adopting hybrid masculinities, there is also the chance that these men may directly or indirectly reify essentialist understandings of gender (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Pleasants, 2011). For example, several men dismantled their hybrid masculinities as they were compelled to justify their involvement in WGS courses by minimizing the broader importance of these classes and framing them in a way that was more palatable for certain friends and family members (i.e., using the label "gender studies" vs. "women's and gender studies"). Thus, the degree to which their social interactions suggest an essentialist gendered dichotomy between masculinity and femininity may reinforce an understanding of men and women as oppositional. In a related vein, this study provides evidence of men incorporating feminist principles into their social relationships and their intrinsic identities. At least on the surface, men taking WGS courses appear to contribute to a shift in masculinity toward feminist ideals, but in reality may be further "othering" less privileged identities by manipulating

these statuses for their own social prestige and benefits depending on distinctive interactions and contexts (Arxer, 2011).

The findings from this study have several important implications regarding broader social issues. First, this study points to the potential of men participating in feminism and gender in the dissemination of gender equitable ideals across a wide variety of social groups. Men's involvement in WGS classes and feminist ideology places them in advantageous positions to advocate for gender equality, especially when they hold dominant positions across other social domains (i.e., sexual orientation, race, class). In particular, men who are involved in WGS and feminism can draw from masculine privilege to educate their male peers (Kaufman, 1999; Schmitt, 1998). These findings are also beneficial to WGS curricula by assisting instructors in creating "plug in" opportunities (Messner et al., 2015) for harder-to-access male student populations that could uniquely benefit from gender studies coursework, such as athletes and fraternity members who may hold discriminatory beliefs (Worthen, 2014). In addition, expanding the accessibility of WGS courses to a wider student body can open up opportunities for more students to interact with feminist teachings and engage with issues facing their community (Stake, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Although this study extends scholarly knowledge regarding men's experiences in studying gender and their engagement with feminism, it is not without limitations. As men represent the numerical minority in WGS classes (Flood, 2011), it was difficult to find and recruit men who have taken at least one WGS class. Furthermore, though the Midwestern context (predominantly White and cisgender) of this study posed barriers to sampling men of color and non-cisgender men, it presents a unique environment for studying hybrid masculinities among privileged men (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). The men in this study are able to enter feminist discourse because of their privilege, yet their presence is simultaneously questioned and suspicious. Selection biases also limit the scope of these findings, as participants had taken an average of four WGS classes, making this a unique sample compared with men who may have only taken one WGS course, which could address their generally positive views of feminist rhetoric. This is important to note given that our findings complicate results from previous studies, which demonstrated antifeminist attitudes among men in these courses (Pleasants, 2011; Thomssen et al., 1995).

This study informs future research by identifying areas of further inquiry. For example, little is known about men's qualitative reasoning for avoiding

the study of gender or involvement with feminism. A complementary exploration of experiences of men with WGS backgrounds and men who have never taken a WGS course could reveal more about the barriers preventing men's exposure to feminism. Future studies also need to address how men may unwittingly reproduce gender inequality, even as they incorporate more expansive understandings of masculinity into their lives (Bridges, 2014). This type of research can further illuminate the social complexities of gendered beliefs and how people construct their ideologies through hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

This microanalysis shows how a particular group of men in a distinctive cultural and geographical context negotiate meanings surrounding their involvement with feminism and gender studies, despite macrocultural barriers that deter men from the study of gender. Through their exposure to feminist ideology and pedagogy, men who have taken WGS classes could potentially influence others' attitudes and beliefs in productive, meaningful ways by deconstructing stereotypical norms of masculinity. In doing so, however, they enlist hybrid masculinities. That is, they reinforce privileged identities (e.g., young, White, middle-class, educated, heterosexual men) by emphasizing, and often appropriating, marginalized identities (e.g., older, feminist, non-White, lower class, uneducated, gay women) to justify their WGS studies. This process may be contributing to an alternative definition of normative masculinity rather than providing evidence that masculine identities are shifting in a more feminist direction. Therefore, this study illustrates the importance of men engaging with feminism and gender scholarship by exploring the notion of who can legitimately study gender and practice feminist teachings. This is treacherous territory, however, considering the development of hybrid masculinities and the dual potential they hold to simultaneously expand men's commitment to gender inequality and mask the persistence of broader social privilege.

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