

## Gender Discourse, Awareness, and Alternative Responses for Men in Everyday Living

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### Abstract

In this paper, the authors use examples from their experiences to explore the nuances and complexities of contemporary gender practices. They draw on discourse and positioning theories to identify the ways in which culturally dominant, and difficult to notice, gender constructions help shape everyday experiences. In addition, the authors share their view that there are benefits in developing skills in noticing contemporary practices made available by dominant gender constructions. Such noticing expands possibilities for ways of responding and relating that might produce outcomes for men and women that fit with their hopes for living.

Travelling in her car recently, Elmarie saw a scene with two men. One man was being issued a traffic ticket for a minor violation. The other man was a police officer. The first man's car was under the surveillance of the police car's flashing lights and he himself was under the gaze of those in cars witnessing the scene. His face was turned away from the flow of traffic. Unease was written all over his body.

For the purposes of this article we are interested in how being a man might have shaped this person's experience of receiving a traffic ticket. Culturally taken-for-granted ideas about men and masculinity may have been readily available for him to make meaning of his experiences of this moment. For example, alongside other alternatives there is a culturally taken-for-granted idea that men should maintain control at all times. This popular idea might have produced discomfort for this man at not having a say in what was happening to him or how it was happening. Another common idea that may have been available to him is that men do not experience vulnerability. This idea might then have had him moving quickly from embarrassment or fear to experiencing shame, humiliation or failure. Culturally available gender ideas could contribute to a sense that he should hide from view, or show indifference or toughness, or act small in relation to the police officer's authority.

What is important here, for the exploration we offer in this article, is the notion that this man's experience is shaped by culturally available ideas, and in particular ideas

about gender. The traffic infringement situation, like any other, can be “read” in many ways, by the people at the centre of it, and by others. Accounts are rarely singular. However, the different cultural stories that are called on in any situation make particular readings more or less available, and thus limit or expand the actions/responses that are possible for any of us.

We carry the hope, in our practice and in our lives, of noticing and recognising the playing out of cultural stories about gender that limit what is possible, for men and for women, in order that alternatives can be explored and options for action expanded. This article arises out of this hope and purpose.

A description of the theoretical tools that we use, in recognising the playing out of gender stories and exploring possible responses, follows in the next section of this article. Our emphasis, as the article continues, is on specific interactions that demonstrate possible readings of a number of particular life situations. In these examples, we show how gender stories shape interactions, and how we work to explore and expand possibilities for ways of responding and relating, with an emphasis on finding alternative routes for men’s ways of being and relating.

### **The shaping effects of cultural stories**

We understand that the stories of culture are carried through discourses. On the terms of poststructuralist theories, discourses are understood to be “practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) and thus produce both practices and people who engage in these practices (Fairclough, 1992; Parker, 1994). Here is an example of how this works, taken from Kathie’s memory of her grandmother, Mary.

Mary used to tell Kathie stories of her childhood in the early years of the 20th century. In one story Mary was a young girl whistling as she scrubbed the wooden doorstep at her grandmother’s house. Mary’s grandmother said to her, “Men don’t like whistling women.” Mary’s grandmother’s words and Mary’s retelling them to Kathie carried cultural stories. Through the discursive practices of scrubbing, whistling, reprimanding or guiding, telling a story, listening to a story, laughing together, and making meaning of a story, discourse was being produced and reproduced. Gender and gender practices were being formed as Mary’s grandmother told her this story about men and women, and as Mary retold the story to Kathie. Lives were being shaped on the terms of gender discourse, as gender discourse was being re-spoken into life.

“Men don’t like whistling women” illustrates how gender discourse offers positions for both men and women. As discourses are enacted through discourse practices, they

determine what actions are appropriate, for both men and women. Discourse thus “hails” us, calling and inviting us to “listen as a certain type of person” and then offering us particular speaking or acting positions (Parker, 1991, pp. 9–10). It thus produces expectations for how we will act as gendered persons.

As we act in response to such expectations and positions—by taking up or resisting invitations—we actively participate in discourse production (Drewery, 2005). This is what is so important to us about these discourse ideas: they show both how we are shaped by available cultural stories and how we ourselves can contribute to the stories that are available for shaping lives.

On one hand, discourses can have the effect of essentialising or totalising:

*To essentialize experience refers to naturalizing it or treating it as a fixed, or given, element of a “real” or natural self. Essentializing experience takes it out of its social and historical context. It is, then, problematically treated as though it were unquestionable truth: It is given the authority to represent truth.... What is left out of this essentialist construction is how interactive, social, and historical forces shape the creation, interpretation, and performance of meaning. (Brown, 2007, pp. 182–183)*

As the whistling example shows, there is a danger that an unquestionable truth is storied through the fixing and thus naturalising of a claim about both men and women. In this way essentialised gender constructions potentially produce limitations for all of us.

We do not believe that a person can escape the internalisation of essentialist gender ideas. Any of us can find ourselves thinking about our selves or others in these terms. Nor can we ever be completely free of the positions these terms can produce in relationships. Essentialist gender stories have such an established history as social constructions within interpersonal and institutional structures that they are available for us all as potential ways of understanding experience.

While particular constructions may be culturally centralised—as essentialised gender stories are—alternative knowledge is always possible (White, 1991; White & Epston, 1990). The twinkle in Mary’s eye and the mirth that she and Kathie shared in response to the story invoked other possible knowledge and discursive practices of living. Mary’s telling of Kathie’s great, great grandmother’s advice both reproduced the centralised knowledge of dominant gender discourse, and produced resistance to that centralised knowledge. A story like Mary’s carries gender prescriptions for men and women, and also carries the possibility of how things might be other than as prescribed.

It may seem easy to look back from 2007 and see the restricting/limiting effects of essentialist gender discourse being reproduced in early-20th-century daily life. Perhaps less visible, however, are the ongoing effects of essentialised stories of gender in our own contemporary lives and practices, including in an event as seemingly banal as being issued with a traffic ticket.

Our focus in this article is to pay attention to essentialist gender discourse and the options for acting it offers, for in paying attention to the positions available to us, new options for action open up (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). According to Davies (1993), as we “disattend the pane of glass to look at the view out the window, so we generally disattend discourse. It is not until the glass fractures or breaks, for example, that we focus differently” (p. 153). Steve invited first Elmarie and then Kathie to join him in shaping this article, as part of his commitment as a man to contributing to the possibilities of “attending discourse” and so focusing differently. The commitment is to challenging the ongoing reproduction of essentialised gender identities and practices, thus increasing possibilities for responses that fit more with our own and others’ personal preferences. We believe that the more awareness we hold about the ways essentialist gender ideas position us, and those around us, the more we can notice alternative possibilities. We have found that with alternative possibilities comes a greater sense of agency for taking up ways of being that do not necessarily fit with, or reproduce, essentialist or totalising ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Although Mary’s story might show that essentialised gender constructions have changed over time, nonetheless gender stories continue to circulate. They continue to contain within them claims of truth status. This being the case, even men (and women) who strongly prefer alternative practices in their lives constantly navigate within, around, and through practices shaped by what, on closer investigation, appear to be essentialist gender ideas.

### **Making a purposeful response**

Imagine, again, the man being issued a traffic ticket. If he were aware of the position calls that essentialist masculinity ideas were making available, he might resist the idea that he is less of a man for experiencing vulnerability. He might act from this protest position by saying to the police officer, “I am very embarrassed standing here while people are watching us,” thus acknowledging his experience of vulnerability. His purpose may be to claim vulnerability as an acceptable dimension of his identity.

If the police officer were also aware of essentialist gender ideas, he might offer a relational response such as, “Yes, I have been in your shoes myself.” This kind of

response might be in line with values the officer holds about protesting against dominant gender ideas that suggest men in authority act in disconnected and non-relational ways.

A complicating factor is that whatever non-essentialist position the man receiving the ticket may take up, the police officer might respond with a strong essentialist gender stance that could include acts of humiliation, degradation, and marginalisation. Not knowing what position another person might take up is a factor that makes it difficult for people considering alternative practices for themselves.

As we have said, individuals who strongly prefer ways of being that do not fit with dominant, essentialist gender ideas can still re-produce those ideas. For example, a man driving past the scene of the traffic incident might momentarily experience a sense of private superiority for winning at the competitive game of “not getting caught”. Or, he might find himself identifying with the man in taking an anti-authority position. However, aware of how essentialist ideas about masculinity often connect competition and masculinity, he might prefer an alternative, perhaps empathic, response for both the man and the police officer.

As well as shaping private experience, essentialist gender ideas can also help shape how relationships evolve. How, for example, might we imagine dominant gender discourse shaping the conversation between the man and a male police officer? How might essentialist ideas about men and authority position the police officer as he relates with the man whom he stopped? How might essentialist ideas about men and masculinity position witnesses differently if the police officer were a woman? If the police officer were a woman, would essentialist gender ideas position witnesses to notice gender more, or less?

The article goes on from here to offer illustrations from our own lived experiences of internalising essentialist gender ideas, and efforts to navigate beyond them. Our purpose is to increase awareness of the contextual histories, and problematic and subjective effects, of essentialist gender stories, recognising that these stories intersect with all other socially constructed discourses of identity, like race and class. With more awareness of discourse come more possibilities for intentionally accepting, rejecting, subverting, or changing those positions (Davies, 1991, p. 51).

### **Intentional responses for relationship building**

In pausing to notice the shaping effects of discourse, and pausing to ask questions, we can contribute to “troubling” (Davies, 2000, p. 14)—disturbing—essentialist position calls offered by dominant gender discourse. Our experience is that the production of alternative relationship practices involves paying care-full attention to available

positions made by particular gender constructions. To illustrate how troubling essentialist gender ideas can offer opportunities for intentional responses, we turn to the co-production of our current working relationships.

Elmarie and Steve met by phone when Steve applied for a one-year teaching position in the Counsellor Education Programme at the University of Waikato, where Elmarie is a full-time faculty member. They come from very different territories of identity, including gender, age, language, and nationality. Steve was born and raised in the western United States and Elmarie has lived most of her life in South Africa. Professionally, Elmarie is an experienced academic with extensive clinical experience while Steve is an experienced clinician and a newer academic. At the time Steve applied for the job, Elmarie was the acting programme director.

Even before they met face to face, an event occurred that offered them a chance to begin navigating their working relationship. After accepting the position, Steve wrote an email to Elmarie in which he referred to himself as a “professor”. This language use produced a difficult position for Elmarie: she knew the term professor in the New Zealand context designates seniority, while in US universities the term is generic.

Elmarie was concerned that Steve might be uncomfortable in his academic position in New Zealand if he were to continue to refer to himself as a professor. Should she respond to this concern? She did not know Steve. She recognised, however, that providing information could be read as “correcting”. If Steve read it this way, how would he experience a woman correcting him? Would dominant gender discourse call him into male authority and thus position him to come to negative conclusions about her, or to assume a hidden motive? Would there be embarrassment for him, and would he respond to discomfort in the kinds of defensive, aggressive or withdrawn way dominant gender discourse might call him to?

Elmarie also considered what might happen if she were not to provide information. What positions might be available—for Steve, herself as acting director, and other staff in the department including professors and aspiring professors—if he were to speak of himself as a professor in the New Zealand context? Choosing to act on her concern for Steve’s experiences of the transition into New Zealand academic culture, she crafted this email:

*I hope it is ok to mention something to you, which I remember I experienced when I visited the United States. There seems to be an academic difference between South Africa and the United States, which is also applicable here in New Zealand. The title “professor” is used in New Zealand for the most senior members of an academic faculty. The School of Education here has only a handful of professors.*

*In the United States the terminology may be used differently to indicate a person who is a teacher at a university. Here, in New Zealand, it is a senior position that an academic applies for after years of research and publications. These publications position them as experts in their disciplines. In our department, we have only one professor, a number of associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers, as well as senior tutors and tutors. The position you have been appointed to is called Visiting Teaching Fellow and people will probably understand this VTF title better within this context. I hope you don't mind me mentioning this to you even before we have met face to face.*

At first Steve was not sure how to make sense of Elmarie's email. For example, the idea that Elmarie might be attempting to "put him in his place" produced fear and anxiety. However, calling on the ideas we are illustrating in this paper, Steve was able to resist such calls, and go beyond the limited possibilities these offered him or his relationship with Elmarie.

First, he was aware that many ideas available to him were connected to socially constructed essentialist gender ideas that he had internalised over the course of his life. He was further aware of how jumping to conclusions based on these readings often involves a misreading of the other person.

Steve was able to identify a preferred position for him that had to do with valuing and learning about cultural differences. He also was able to connect with his preference for how he wants to be as a man, given his understanding of the history of gender injustices. His preference for being as a man is to care more about the effects he is producing than whatever his intentions might be; and to be accountable rather than to blame, attack, judge, or withdraw when experiencing different forms of discomfort. These ways of being fit better for Steve than what he thinks of as dominant traditions that centralise men's experiences over women's.

Once aware of and connected to his preferences, Steve responded to Elmarie with an appreciation of her willingness to inform him about the term professor. In the process, he also imagined what Elmarie may have had to navigate as a woman to share this information. Discovering a response that fitted with his preference, he could enjoy demonstrating his commitment to valuing women's voices, accountability, and cultural differences with his response. His eventual email reply was:

*Thank you so much for this information. I want to learn as much as possible about New Zealand culture and cultural diversity, the Treaty of Waitangi, as well as other refined nuances of cultural differences. This seems to be an example of differences*

*within the academic culture that I may come across. Thank you for making this available to me. I value knowing when I may not understand something, and working relationships where I am informed about the negative effects that I inadvertently produce.*

Steve's response offered Elmarie a position that fitted with her hopes for the interaction. Elmarie remembers experiencing warm feelings toward Steve through a strong resonance with the importance she places on considerations of culture and gender, and the infrequent experiences she has had where a man has expressed concerns about gender. This exchange offered the relationship a chance to develop in a way that Steve and Elmarie both value.

Staying in relationship when challenging experiences emerge is a difficult practice that has helped Steve stay connected to his values. He believes dominant gender ideas about what it means to be a man contributed to the challenges he experienced in learning this skill. Gender stories that suggest men should not have to experience emotional hurt or discomfort often produced position calls that did not generate the kinds of relationships he most desired. Therefore, he has learned he has to be most careful and accountable when he feels vulnerable, as that is when he is most likely to re-produce dominant gender practices without thinking.

Steve's pathway to understanding the production and reproduction of gender discourse in his life includes many painful personal experiences. He is grateful for teachers who he experienced as offering both care and challenges. It has been especially helpful for him to develop an understanding where personal accounts of his life can stand alongside and in acknowledgement of an analysis of the injustices that dominant stories have produced. Though difficult at times, his journey has produced a life of closeness in relationships that he values over anything that might have developed otherwise.

The development of alternative relationship practices made it possible for Steve, upon his arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand, to ask Elmarie, and Kathie, how they felt about working alongside a white male heterosexual American. Steve's question was intentional. He wanted to initiate a clear message that he valued conversations about privilege, and did not assume his privileges were not a problem for Elmarie and Kathie. He also hoped to show his desire to know what they experienced so that he could demonstrate respect for whatever positions they held.

Similarly, without Elmarie's experience working against social injustices of patriarchy, racism, classism, and nationalism, she would not have been able to intentionally respond in a light-hearted but serious way. Following Steve's question

and a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Elmarie looked at Kathie and then returned her attention to Steve. She responded:

*I bring with me many experiences working alongside male colleagues. My experiences vary from exciting and comfortable to uncomfortable and very difficult. I have at times experienced disqualification and at other times respect for what I have to offer as a colleague. I am therefore hopeful but also a bit apprehensive about how we will work together, Steve.*

Elmarie took a risk to have a voice on her own behalf and on behalf of the small and large injustices that can be perpetrated on the terms of male privilege. She took this risk despite countless experiences where men in positions of privilege had responded to her honesty with judgement, ridicule, retribution and/or withdrawal. In addition, Elmarie's response offered Steve another position call that made it possible for him to take up his preferred way of being as a man. Responding, Steve said:

*Thank you so much for your honesty. It is a relief to think that it is possible to work with you both with that level of honesty. I would like to be a colleague who is accountable for the negative effects I may not intend. It may not always be visible to me when I generate these negative effects, but I will always value the opportunity to know about and respond to them.*

Elmarie and Kathie both responded by stating that they too believed they could produce unintended effects and valued knowing when that took place. Among other things, this exchange opened opportunities for Steve, Elmarie and Kathie to think about the intersections of gender and academic discourses (Sondergaard, 2005, p. 189). Eventually, this would lead us to a research project where the three of us began exploring how we could develop conversations that could sustain reflections, in counsellor education, on essentialist gender discourses.

This back and forth offering and accepting of position calls that supported open and respectful relationship constructions quickly made it possible for the three of us to take more risks and experience more confidence and safety in our working relationships. This article is one of the outcomes of our accepting the invitations we offered each other for an ongoing dialogic relationship in which it is possible to explore and understand gender discourse.

Our working relationships have included difficult moments and bumps along the way, but we choose to identify these experiences as “mo(ve)ments” that offered new opportunities for intentional responses (Davies et al., 2006, p. 92). We share our experience to illustrate the ongoing helpfulness to us of Davies' suggestion that discourse,

rather than revealing a person's "real nature", "has effects" (1998, p. 36). Thus, when Steve experienced the possibility that he was being "put in his place", discourse ideas supported him to consider the effects of dominant gender discourse in producing this response, rather than attributing the problem to Elmarie as a person. Similarly, Elmarie did not assume that Steve's use of "professor" reflected some inherent quality in him.

It is not because of "real natures" that the relationships about which we write have been possible, but as an effect of considered, careful, and at times rigorous and difficult work to navigate gender discourse. It is the work, the processes, and the use of discourse ideas, which we intend to witness in this article.

### **Supporting men's opportunities for intentional responses**

We hold the hope in counsellor education and practice of supporting men to explore ways in which dominant gender discourse positions them and others. However, in many contexts we have found it confusing, difficult and challenging to facilitate sustained conversations that explore the problematic effects of essentialist gender stories and dominant gender discourse. The following example, an imaginary story composed out of many different situations, illustrates our experiences of these intersections.

Let us imagine a counsellor education class, where students are engaged in a conversation about gender discourse. A teacher introduces a discussion topic: the intersections of gender discourse, education and privilege. A student, Tom, responds: "I am not going to participate in this conversation. It is too biased toward women. It's too intimidating."

*Elmarie: What's the bias you experience, Tom?*

*Tom: It's a pretty intimidating topic. Past attempts to share my own personal perspectives have been responded to strongly by some women and I end up feeling silenced. When I have spoken about my experiences—patriarchy can disadvantage men, too—my experiences haven't got cared for much. The focus is always on the women. I don't trust these kinds of conversations: I'm likely to be attacked for just trying to share my story. It's not safe to speak.*

The position calls that are available in Tom's expressions shape the identities of all those acting and watching, as they respond to, accept, refuse or resist such calls. What positions are available for responding without diminishing anyone, while also keeping, at the centre of the conversation, engagements that invite Tom and the rest of the class to be intentional and aware of the effects of gender privilege?

Using ideas about gender discourse we notice:

- Tom's overt action is to announce a withdrawal from the conversation.
- Focusing on Tom's experience potentially:
  - Re-produces patriarchal gender constructions that privilege men's experiences over women's.
  - Limits the space for women to talk freely about their experiences of how dominant gender stories produce experiences of large and small injustices.
- In addition, women might experience a difficult either/or binary because:
  - First, if they speak their indignation at Tom's centralising his experience, or at his withdrawal, they, too, may appear insensitive towards Tom's experiences, thus potentially re-producing essentialised gender ideas that erase men's pain. Such speaking may also provide the basis for justifying criticisms, withdrawal, and other forms of "punishment" for not keeping men's personal experiences as the centre.
  - Second, the women may act with sensitivity toward Tom and his experiences of disadvantage. However, such sensitivity, through keeping men's experiences centralised, might further marginalise and invisibilise women's stories of gender injustice, and thus continue the re-production of dominant gender discourse.
- Ideas offered by dominant gender discourse, such as that men are always entitled to defend their particular perspective, position all participants. At the same time, many other gender discourse ideas circulate, positioning participants in various ways.

Thinking in terms of these discourse ideas, some considerations that are present for us include:

- How can this impasse be spoken about?
- What language needs to be available to address the impasse?
- What else might we need to put in place to bridge this impasse situation?
- What space can be made available for all to move forward in the conversation?

As educators our responses in such a situation will often depend on collaboration and generous spirit within our professional team to find ways forward. Trust in the intentions we all hold supports honesty and openness between us as we negotiate complex gender stories.

Let us again imagine the classroom, where there is awkward silence, clear discomfort, and a response from a woman student that suggests she is poorly positioned to go beyond the terms Tom's withdrawal offers her. She speaks of awkwardness, and resentment about what Tom has said, and there being no way forward. A few others voice agreement.

As educators we believe it is our responsibility to attend to the apparent impasse that has followed Tom's speaking, in order to open the conversational space in ways that trouble the reproduction of dominant gender discourse. A possible approach is to investigate words and language, as well as intentions and the effects words produce (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). A related approach draws on discourse theory: the focus is on exploring, and troubling, discourse and its effects (Davies, 1998, 2000; Davies & Harré, 1990).

Pausing the conversation, we return to Tom's words: "I don't see myself participating in this biased discussion." After asking permission, Elmarie writes the words on the whiteboard, asking Tom about the intentions behind his words. Tom is quiet for a few moments, then says that it was an innocent statement about what he thinks, and he just wanted to share his perspective.

*Elmarie: What did you hope for in offering this statement?*

*Tom: That by being frank and open, other students would take up a debating style of conversation. I just wanted to start the discussion by being transparent.*

Elmarie writes the intentions next to the words on the whiteboard. She asks whether Tom would be willing or interested in hearing the meaning that others in the group have made of these words. She also asks him whether he could keep one eye on his intentions, while also stepping into the territory of their understanding, witnessing self and other (Weingarten, 2000) at the same time.

Sally says that she read the practice of male privilege into the words, while she thought the discussion had been inviting reflection and self-reflection on privilege. She says she was hurt by the way in which the words centralised Tom and his experience. His sharing did not assist in the troubling of privilege, but demonstrated an automatic practice of male privilege.

Ann suggests Tom did not take the group members into account: the statement did not position her well as a woman. "It did not create space for me to talk. I did not feel invited into the conversation." She believes that the word "biased" closed any possibility of dialogue, and defined the topic of gender and members as biased just as the conversation was beginning.

Elmarie asks Tom if he was aware of any of this. Tom answers, "I did not know that what I said would have this effect. I am not sure how this happens, but I think it happens with my daughters because we are not as close as we were when they were young." Elmarie asks Tom if he would like to continue the conversation or if he would like to stop at this point. Continuing, Tom states that these effects are not what he

prefers. He does not intend to make conversation so difficult for others. “How have my intentions gone so wrong?” he asks.

Elmarie asks the women to speak about the apparent discrepancy between Tom’s intentions and effects. They confirm that his intentions were distorted by the words. His comments did not produce the desired effect. On the contrary, the women experienced distance, criticism and blame and wanted to defend themselves. Tom turns to the women who have spoken: “I am really sorry. I never intended to close you down. Listening to you I realise that I did that. I think I probably do this more than I realise.”

At this point, Steve sees an opportunity to enrich the non-essentialist gender statements that are present for Tom. He speaks about how difficult it was for him as a man to learn to consider the possible effects of what he says. He shares how there was a time when he could only see his intentions and would defend them no matter what. Steve offers that caring about effects as much as intentions has helped him do much better in relationships.

Steve asks Tom if it would be alright to ask him some more questions about some of what he just said. Tom agrees, and Steve asks what kind of hopes he has for his connection with his daughters. This invitation is based on re-authoring practices to help thicken the story of Tom’s preferred position on relationships (White, 2004a, 2004b). The possibility of such a conversation has arisen from troubling dominant gender discourse bringing other possible positions out of obscurity. In response, Tom shares that he wishes to be available to hear his daughters’ experiences. He is concerned that as his daughters are getting older, they may be experiencing what the women in class are saying. He tearfully states that he wants to be more successful in his relationships with women.

Steve next asks Sally and Ann if they would like to share some reflections on hearing about Tom’s preferred position. Sally says she did not realise that men who engage with male privilege also carry invisible stories that contradict male privilege. This experience has her thinking about how she might talk differently with her husband, and her grandson the next time she sees him.

Ann shares that hearing Tom made her much more interested in connecting with him. She says that she values his ideas in class, but that she has not felt he had much interest in her perspective. The conversation offers her hope that Tom would become more curious about her ideas.

As we understand it, Tom’s experience, and first speaking, was shaped by both male privilege and his personally painful experience. The intersection of privilege and pain produced a position that made it difficult for him to reflect on the effects of patriarchal constructions in the world.

*Sometimes our experiences of individual hardship can obscure for us how we are living with privilege in relation to race, gender, class, etc. One way to think about this is to try to imagine what our individual experience of hardship would be like if we did not live with the privilege that we do. (Raheim et al., n.d., p. 5)*

Our hope for this interaction is that Tom is better positioned to explore alternative practices as a man. We would hope, too, that space having been created for the women in the class to speak and be heard, they also might be better positioned to navigate future moments, when intersecting discourses, such as gender privilege and personal pain, close down options for speaking. Finally, we hope we are all better positioned to trouble gender discourse as we live our lives.

Accepting discomfort helps us to be present in efforts to address dominant gender stories that produce privilege and injustice. Without those skills, we can easily be separated from our intention to expose and explore essentialist gender discourses in respectful ways with generous spirit.

## **Conclusion**

This paper suggests that one route to exploring and expanding ways of being involves the troubling of gender discourse. Reflections on the shaping effects of essentialist stories can help increase possibilities for men to take up intentional and purposeful practices of living. As illustration, we introduced examples from everyday experiences, our working relationships, and our working context as educators. Our hope is to support readers who wish to challenge the effects of essentialist gender discourses and who value increased possibilities for responses that fit with personal preferences.

However, writing and speaking about gender is complex: gender discourse is present in our writing and your reading. In keeping with our attempts to practise accountability and generous spirit, we accept that we may have inadvertently produced some problematic position calls for some readers. We genuinely invite readers to inform us about the effects our positions produce.

We draw examples from our lived experiences because we value what those experiences offer in terms of identifying particularities in situations where we have been stretched into new understandings or other possible responses. We believe that particularities make it possible to examine micro-practices of human action as we enact discourse and live gendered lives. Of course, we cannot know in advance of your reading this paper, and hearing from you, what position calls we produced or the position calls you wish to offer in response. We hope we get the chance to know.

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